# Research Article

## COOPERATIVE LEARNING AS A DETERMINANT OF SOCIALIZATION OF ROMA PUPILS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

**\*Michal Pankevič**

Department of Pre-school and Elementary Pedagogy, Faculty of Education, Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovak Republic.

### ABSTRACT

If the education of Roma pupils is to be effective, it should respect the peculiarities of their initial situation and offer openness, flexibility, and variability of approach. It's about the ability to formulate broader conceived and current educational goals in purviews of known individual needs of pupils and local specificities, the ability to create and utilize a multicultural educational environment. One of the necessary requirements of positive change that emerges from a reality presented in this way is the achievement of aimed and at the same time synergistic formation of cognitive, emotional and conative components of attitude of Roma pupils. The development happens primarily through intentional induction of pupil activities in the form of situations and tasks of creative nature, problem solving and use of methods, forms and aids that do not allow for the creation of thought stereotypes. One of the strategies employed in this process is cooperative learning. The article offers a theoretical and methodological determination of an actual exploratory research study aimed at cooperative learning in discourse of the specifics of socialization of Roma pupils in the educational practice of primary schools.

*Keywords:* cooperative learning, primary education, Roma pupil, socialization.

## INTRODUCTION

*„Ko kamel ča pes, na džanel s'oda bacht".*
[He, who only likes himself, doesn't know what happiness is]
*Roma proverb*

The current modern development of science, technology and society as a whole represents a need for the educational system to react to the political, societal or economic conditions in society. The need for humanisation and democratisation of education and learning is accentuated. We understand, however, that the school system in Slovakia is despite the humanistic endeavours still predominantly oriented towards memorizing, mastering quantities of teaching material and less aimed at experiencing, motivation and value orientation of pupils. However, in life one needs to know how to evaluate, fantasize, imagine, create, needs to know how to cooperate and persevere in one's ambitions. This confluent dimension reveals the concept of a person, who knows their own abilities and characteristics, knows how to apply them in life and is able to lead a happy and fulfilling life. The effectiveness of primary education, especially for Roma pupils in the first grade of primary schools, increases proportionately with the attractiveness of forms in which it is performed. It is the strategies supporting cooperative learning that may be considered in this regard to be a strong activating agent, expanding the cognitive, as well as non-cognitive skills of pupils, while at the same time enriching their upbringing. This means to mainly focus on developing the divergent thinking of pupils, whose approach to learning is creative, cooperative learning expands their range of opportunities, how to learn from others, how to teach others, how to learn to cooperate and solve problems. It provides room for self-knowledge and self-evaluation, teaches to react in an appropriate, reasonable and prompt manner.

**\*Corresponding Author: Michal Pankevič,**
Department of Pre-school and Elementary Pedagogy, Faculty of Education, Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovak Republic.

## CONTEXTS OF SOCIALIZATION OF ROMA PUPILS

Pupils from a socially disadvantaged environment, dominated by Roma pupils from marginalised Roma communities (MRC), present a specific and crucial social problem formed by differences in life style, but also cultural, social and economic factors. This problem manifests for example in a verbal and consequently a cognitive deficit, limited informedness oftentimes determined by isolated living locations, other traditions, different perception of family upbringing - tolerance for the use of addictive substances, insufficient level of health awareness, personal a communal hygiene, young age for first pregnancies in women and in relation to it large families, irregular and low-quality nutrition, frequent disability in the family, underestimating the importance of education and learning, focus on the present without the ambition to plan or the absence of own strategy for social change. The solution to the above set of problems assumes a transnational, interdisciplinary approach across multiple resorts and institutions. A change of the social position and a solution to the problems related to the society of majority is, despite the complexity of the presented phenomenon, conditioned by the education and erudition of Roma people. The current level education of the Roma population is very unsatisfactory. The majority of Roma people have only primary education, and even that is oftentimes not finished. However, the determining factor in solving Roma problems is education. The conflicting relationships of Roma communities with the majority peoples are carried over to and negatively affect the relationship of Roma parents and children in school, and vice versa [11]. This, naturally, makes the situation regarding education even more complicated. This is further complicated by the tolerant attitude of the Roma family towards socially undesirable forms of behaviour, absence of their correction, focus on different values, which gets eventually reflected in the failures of children at school and consequently their aversion to make a change. The facts presented here result in a failure of the broader socialization of the members of the Roma ethnic group. Based on the results of research done by Hroncová and Šebian [3] and exploratory studies of Locke and Ciechalski [8], it is possible to identify problems teachers generally

face during education in relation to the process of socialization of Roma pupils. These mainly include:

- bilingualism - various degree of proficiency of the majority and minority language;
- general distrust and fear of the majority culture,
- strong focus on ethnicity, increased sensitivity to real (but also apparent) discrimination,
- unprocessed or suppressed aggression and desire to rebel or take revenge for real or apparent wrongdoings,
- missing loyalty towards institutions and establishments created by the majority,
- distrust and only slightly internalized belief in the significance of systematic and persistent work, in the need for authority and law,
- internal insecurity, whether to speak and act in accordance with one's own culture or the culture of the majority,
- the ability "to pretend" in front of the representatives of the majority, to lie to them, tendency to not act openly,
- increased sensitivity to non-verbal expressions and their possible conflict with the contents of a teacher's speech during communication;

Compared to the pupils of the majority, the Roma pupils from MRCs have in the process of their socialization into educational reality a different starting position. They have to overcome more difficult challenges, of which common denominators are mainly:

- economic constraints related to poor social situation of families (lack of stimulation, the pathological social and educational environment, that is oftentimes present, does not support an effective socialization of the child in all categories i.e. acquisition of knowledge and skills, discovery of philosophical, ethical and aesthetic systems and creation of a value ladder, acquisition of adequate forms of social behaviour that correspond with societal norms),
- perceiving school as a place, where one only experiences failure, problems, feelings of inferiority, fear of rejection, etc.
- low level of education of parents, low ranking of education in their value ladder,
- different speech development,
- focus on the present, lack of sense for planning, future,
- overall low demand for education in the family, behavioural models of the parents that do not point out the connection between education and the work market,
- differences in temperament, problems in communication with other pupils,
- low expectations of the teachers,
- persistent indifference of a part of the environment towards Roma pupils,
- missing habits and skills in relation to norms, goals,
- insufficient (internal) motivation to complete given tasks, low self-esteem etc. [2].

A Roma family, especially in a MRC, generally is a large family with presumed considerable social dependence, with signs of long-term low economic, educational, cultural and sanitary level. A family, where a child is insufficiently stimulated in an intellectual, emotional and psycho-social manner, conditions subsequent failure in school, fatalism, lack of effort, aversion to change anything, resigning to fate. For the children from such families this creates a social and educational deficit that later on manifests in a socio-cultural resistance during the integration into the society of the majority. Portik ([11], p. 95) considers time to be the main trigger mechanism for the malfunction of the ability to socialise and socially integrate, and he means "the time, without which it is impossible to learn the ability to integrate into society. A time that provides room for information exchange, discovery of serfdom, giving a helping hand, accepting advice, endearment and sincere admonition". (Original: „ten čas, bez ktorého schopnosť naučiť sa žiť v spoločenstve to nie je možné. Ten čas, v ktorom je priestor na výmenu informácií, odkrývanie človečenstva, podávanie pomocnej ruky, prijímanie rád, ľudské pohladenie i úprimné napomenutie".).

On the basis of empirical experience of teachers or published findings and recommendations relating to the socialization of Roma pupils [3] it is possible to formulate a number of starting points. We mean mainly:

- formation of professional and personal profile of teachers and other educators working with Roma pupils,
- respecting individual and group needs of Roma pupils when taking into consideration internal atomisation of ethnicity and local contexts,
- utilisation of effective motivation to teach Roma pupils using their interests, or emotional bond towards their own, Roma community respectively,
- adjusting the content and method to the influence of differences, habits, capabilities, experience, schemes of thinking and pace of Roma pupils while respecting the societal target standards,
- explaining social norms, training communication and social skills (rule for life and life skills);

We think that the reality of education should be such that the school should start to approach the (Roma) pupil instead of the pupil (still) having to continually adapt to the school. However, this shift will only occur if the following happens:

- change in the approach of the teacher to the types of intelligence of their pupils (in connection with the recognition of their teaching and cognitive styles),
- change in the approach of the teacher to the factors influencing the teaching potential of their pupils, which eventually leads to an external change of the overall functioning of the given school,
- change in the approach of the teacher to the teaching process used with their pupils (a so-called epistemological approach to this process), where it is possible to employ cooperation as a valid strategy.

## FOUNDATIONS OF COOPERATIVE LEARNING

The method of performing the educational process in regard to the specifics of Roma pupils indicates challenging requirements for the teacher's activity. During planning and performance of education of the target group of pupils, the teacher is confronted with a search for an answer to the question - how to please the developmental needs of my pupils without having them fail? And at the same time, how to ensure the development of pupils in the scope of their individual capabilities, which are different for each and every one of them [13]. We assume, that creating an environment, which is able to transform the specifics of Roma pupils into challenges and possibilities, is provided for in the philosophy of cooperative learning and teaching. The literature defines cooperative learning as a teaching technology; in other words, a set of processes that help pupils achieve a specific goal during interactions [5]. In terms of pupil development, the understanding of the education system itself can be interpreted as "an organised group work, where pupils cooperate in small groups, where the distinctive feature is learning by mutual cooperation and mutual transfer of experience" ([4], p. 30) (Original: "organizovanú skupinovú prácu, v ktorej žiaci spolupracujú v malých skupinách, pričom charakteristickým znakom je učenie sa vzájomnou spoluprácou a vzájomným odovzdávaním skúseností"). The participation of every pupil in the class regardless of their mental performance, social and economic status or ethnic origin is a requirement for this type of learning. The key for the needs of our research is the thesis that cooperative learning allows each pupil to succeed at their own level

and thus fully develop and use their potential. In order for cooperative learning to be truly effective, it is necessary to transform the main principles of conception into a real educational situation. This means to:

1. Ensure a positive mutual dependence of group members in terms of the phrase "we sink or swim together". The prerequisite for creating a dependency is:

   - formation of actually achievable goals, identification of social skills that the teacher plans to develop,
   - definition of norms (rules) applicable to all groups,
   - preparation of activities, division of tasks in a manner, where all pupils of a group can participate,
   - division of information sources in a manner, where every group member can work and complete information that is necessary for task completion,
   - consideration of a reward system for pupils.

2. Ensure mutual contact between group members, to promote interactions during learning. The teacher is expected to set up (4-6 member) groups, while the method of communication is the crucial part of learning. According to Gillies and Boyle [1], an increase in interaction is achieved when:

   - all information within a group is shared,
   - the group tries to achieve consensus,
   - the group assumes responsibility for their decisions,
   - justifications are expected,
   - challenged are expected,
   - alternatives are discussed before making a decision,
   - group members are encouraging each other to speak.

3. Strengthen personal responsibility of group members a) for completing their part of work, b) for helping with work of others, through:

   - observation of pupils during their joint work and documenting the contributions of each member,
   - individual examination of each pupil,
   - random selection of individuals from the group, who present the results of the work of the whole group,
   - leaving each pupil to explain what they have learnt in front of their classmates ([4], [7]).

4. Improve interpersonal and communicative competences of pupils from the simplest to the most complex, e.g. become acquainted, trust each other, actively communicate, listen to each other, communicate ideas of others in a constructive way, make decisions, accept others, provide support, resolve conflicts constructively, etc. According to Jablonský [4], it is therefore for the teacher necessary to:

   - train pupils in effective interactions before engaging in cooperative learning.
   - provide pupils support points that would facilitate their participation in communication, discussion,
   - organise practical techniques of cooperation, because cooperation needs to be learnt,
   - lead pupils to think about the effectiveness of their cooperative activities.

5. Coordinate the work of groups of pupils and ensure reflection on group activities. Reflection lies primarily in the decision on:

   - which activities should be continued by the group,
   - which practices should be avoided,
   - how to evaluate self and others.

The core of cooperative learning lies in cooperation, which is the reason why effectiveness of the concept and the establishment of the presented social skills determines the evaluation level of group work by all its members and an adequate time for reflection. The progress of pupils is influenced not only by the group dynamic, but also by the conditions the teacher created for the cooperative work. If these presented pillars of cooperative learning are established, the teacher may expect many benefits, which cooperative learning provides. According to a complex analysis of benefits of cooperative learning [6], they can be divided into three sections:

1. Striving to succeed - pupils with various learning characteristics striving to achieve goals; longer retention of taught material; improved vocabulary; fluidity and wording of speech; development of motivation focused on tasks and results; persevering in the performance of tasks; development of critical and creative thinking; expectation of success; formation of positive attitudes towards learning and school.

2. Positive relationships and social support between pupils - a better atmosphere of the community and group cohesion, harmonisation of group work, pro-social behaviour, involvement and care for others, open communication, acceptance of opinions of others, appreciation for differences and acceptance of human diversity as a positive value, cutting down on stereotypes and prejudices, interpersonal attractiveness between members of the majority and minority have been confirmed.

3. Mental health and self-confidence - increased level of emotional maturity, mental flexibility, increased self-confidence, trust in others and optimism, strengthening of autonomy, independence, internalisation of values, handling difficult situations etc.

In view of the particularities of Roma pupil education, the benefits show a potential for change of their, till now weak, social status. During the formulation of our research objective, we also reflect on the fact that scientific literature, mainly of Slovak origin, is less familiar with the discourse on implementation of cooperative learning in education of pupils from MRCs.

## METHODS

During research planning we asked a number of research questions related to the given issue. By further revision and refinement, we have arrived at the formulation of the following research problem:

**What impact will the implementation of cooperative learning strategies have on the process of socialization of Roma pupils?**

The question of the intensity of reach into objective reality is specified mainly in relation to the research goal and tasks. The primary goal of this research is to experimentally confirm the effectiveness of implementing cooperative activities on increasing the effectiveness of socialization of Roma pupils in the first grade of primary school. The above goal further fuels secondary goals:

- application of cooperative education strategies in primary education,
- development and implementation of cooperative activities aimed at the development of social relationships of Roma pupils in first grade of education,
- use of selected exploratory (empirical) method of active research to verify the impact of proposed and implemented games and activities on the state and perspective of social interaction of pupils in classroom (research social relationships within the group with focus on pupil - pupil and teacher - pupil interactions),

The goals give rise to the following research tasks:

- theoretical analysis of the issue,

- performance of ante and post measurement of social relationships in the classroom,
- quantitative and qualitative analysis of findings,
- generalisation of knowledge and recommendations for practice.

Operationalization of the research objective is formulated in the following hypothesis:

**H1:**The use of cooperative learning strategies in educational practice of a classroom will lead to a statistically significant improvement of the socialization of pupils.

Deduction from H1:

The hypothesis determination is derived from an idea formulated by Lužinská ([9], p. 8) in the sense that "adapting existing and accepted values, norms and ways of behaving in an existing community represent the content of socialization. Out of all the levels of education, it is mainly the primary education that emphasizes the social dimension in particular. Many social factors are appearing in education, e.g. self-knowledge of the pupil, self-evaluation, self-discipline, influence of classmates, pro-sociability, learning from one another, teamwork and cooperation, relationships with parents and society etc. [...] Natural instruments of the socialization process and development of social relationships and social competence comprise of various socialization strategies: cooperative method of education, pro-social upbringing, empathy and assertive behaviour". (Original: *„obsahom socializácie je osvojovanie si jestvujúcich a akceptovaných hodnôt, noriem a spôsobov správania v existujúcom spoločenstve. V primárnom vzdelávaní sa asi najviac zo všetkých stupňov vzdelávania kladie dôraz hlavne na sociálnu dimenziu. Vo vyučovaní sa objavuje množstvo sociálnych faktorov, napr. sebapoznanie žiaka, sebahodnotenie, sebadisciplína, vplyv spolužiakov, prosociálnosť, učenie sa jeden od druhého, spolupráca a kooperácia, vzťahy k rodičom a spoločnosti a pod. [...] Prirodzenými prostriedkami procesu socializácie a rozvoja sociálnych vzťahov a sociálnych kompetencií sú rôzne stratégie socializácie: kooperatívny spôsob edukácie, prosociálna výchova, empatia a asertívne správanie".*).

### Research method

This research employed the following methods:

### Literary methods

This group of methods includes the study of relevant science literature (books, periodicals, electronic media, etc.), writing abstracts, processing and sorting them.

### Exploration methods

Quasi-experiment - is the most utilized exploration method of action research, where the effectiveness of experimental intervention (X) is gauged by comparing results of the dependant variable before the experimental intervention ($O_1$) and after the experimental intervention ($O_2$) in one group of people (symbol markers $O_1$ X $O_2$) [14]. In accordance with the set goals and hypothesis verification, the measurement tool used was the questionnaire My Class Inventory. This is a standardized sociometric tool focusing on collecting information in five domains:

- satisfaction in the classroom - relationship of pupils towards their classroom, degree of satisfaction,
- friction in the classroom - complications in pupil relationships, degree of friction and conflicts,
- competitiveness in the classroom - competitive relationships between pupils, amount of effort to stand out, going through failures in school,

- difficulty of learning - experiencing school demands placed on pupils,
- class cohesion - friendly and hostile relationships between pupils, degree of class unity.

### Statistical methods

Mathematical and statistical methods provide for an accurate quantification of the research results. Statistical tests analysing the significance of differences between the mean values, or variations of different groups respectively, are used to statistically verify the hypotheses. As a measure of evaluation in this research, we employ McNemar's test (binary variable), which is considered to be the most sensitive non-parametric alternative to tests for dependant samples.
The statistical processing of data is done by a computer statistics program Statistica (Czech Republic, 2017, program ver. No. 13.5.0.17). However, the facts themselves, their registration and quantitative processing do not signify accuracy of the research. Here it is necessary to organically connect the quantitative processing of data with their qualitative analysis. Therefore, the research also uses theoretical methods (analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, comparison, generalisation).

### Research sample

To objectify the research plans, the location of the sample is determined to be eastern Slovakia, and the basic sample group comes from Košice and Prešov Self-Governing Region (Slovakia). The selection of this location was mainly based on the high concentration of the Roma population, which is undoubtedly reflected in the percentage of Roma pupils in many, especially rural, elementary schools. A sample was created from the basic group by a deliberate selection, which consisted of rural as well as urban elementary schools with Roma classes in the target region. The research sample consisted of 406 Roma pupils. The research was conducted in 2020/2021 (school year).

## ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH RESULTS

We present a descriptive analysis of the collected data in terms of verification of the set hypothesis and on the basis of the presented facts. The primary aim of this research was to experimentally confirm the effectiveness of implementing cooperative activities on increasing the effectiveness of socialization of Roma pupils in the first grade of primary school. Achieving this goal and with it related proposed relationships and connections predicated the formation of the following hypothesis:

**H1:** *The use of cooperative learning strategies in educational practice of a classroom will lead to a statistically significant improvement of the socialization of pupils.*

To verify the above hypothesis, we used a standardized socio-metric questionnaire My Class Inventory focused on collecting information in five domains: satisfaction in classroom, friction, competitiveness, difficulty of learning and class cohesion. The above-mentioned questionnaire was, in the intentions of the given hypothesis, applied in terms of ante and post measurement to the research sample.

*Note: The score attainable in individual categories of the questionnaire ranges from five to fifteen points. In terms of data evaluation, it is necessary to note that for categories conflict, competitiveness and difficulty of learning the lower the score is, the better the result.*

For a graphical representation of the presented data and in view of the number of categories in the questionnaire and the related findings, we have calculated the value of the arithmetic mean of the

data for each of the monitored categories. Data adjusted in this way can be displayed as a graph (see Figure 1).
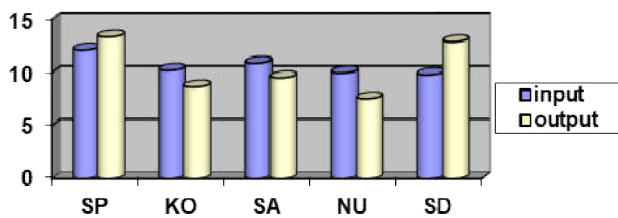


Figure 1 Graphic representation of ante and post measurement results on social relationships of the selected sample
*(Source: own processing)*

Based on the statistical analysis of ante and post measurement results on the degree of social relationships of pupils, it is possible to state that the H1 hypothesis has been confirmed. The statistical significance was investigated using a non-parametric McNemar's test with a significance value of $p = .05$ (see Table 1).

Table 1 Significance of results for measuring the level of social relationships of pupils

| Channels | *p*-value | Statistical Significance |
|---|---|---|
| SP input/output | .04 | + |
| KO input/output | .03 | + |
| SA input/output | .08 | N |
| NU input/output | .03 | + |
| SD input/output | .03 | + |

(Source: own processing)

*Note: The assumed decrease in points has not been detected in the competitiveness category in this sample.*

## DISCUSSION

Since Roma children usually grow up free and oftentimes are left to their own devices, when it comes to activities in school they display limited attention, lack of patience and perseverance, they give up quickly mainly in relation to activities where one needs to use fine motor skills. Therefore during activities, the following is for them crucial: short - fast - clearly - to finish the given activity as soon as possible. It is, therefore, necessary to stress that every educational activity should be performed happily and in a relaxed environment. In order to concentrate their attention, it is a good practice to use alternating activities, contrasts, games. During the education process, it is also necessary to apply a pedagogical approach focused on the development of personality of each pupil. Individual approach respects the differences of social and cultural environment and the individual characteristics and needs of the pupils. We are convinced that one of the main outputs of school education should be optimisation of the intellectual and emotional potential of pupils, i.e. maximising the capacity to become thinking and feeling individuals, who solve problems, support understanding, become innovators, make decisions and communicate effectively. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to create an environment that supports thinking, where information is a catalyst rather than a result. Learning is an objective self-development of the pupil and thus leads to an understanding of the social and moral reality, which is dependent on:

- their individual intellectual level,
- actual social and moral level,
- previous experience and previously created schemes,
- amount of stimulation in the environment.

The creation of such pragmatic base, especially in relation to Roma pupils, needs to emerge from a subjective and direct experience. The solution to many problems related to the ability to socialize and the level of socialization of Roma pupils was provided by the implementation of cooperative learning strategies into their primary education.

## CONCLUSION

Current innovations in education are related to the content, strategies and methods of education directed towards the utilization of active, creativity-engaging and cooperative methods, focused not only on the pupil's performance, but also on their experience, motivation, feelings and value system. Considering this fact, it should be the main priority of a school to facilitate an active approach towards learning, develop the ability of pupils to work in a team, ability to communicate, cooperate and creatively solve problems, think critically and individually. Good education is the basis for a successful future of individuals in a society. In order to socialise Roma children, it is necessary to give them a chance to succeed at school. Roma pupils need time and opportunities to gain experience and skills that can be later on applied in life. Education should, therefore, provide them with opportunities to ponder and facilitate their active engagement in learning.

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