

Prevention of School Failure within a Social Context in the Czech Republic

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Date of publication (dd/mm/yyyy): 23/01/2019

Abstract – The paper turns our attention towards the issue of pupils' school failure and places it within a broader context. It reaches beyond the framework of the school and examines the impact of the social environment through selected variables on two groups of respondents, selected and categorized by the teachers of the 48 schools in question: with the former group consisting of the pupils who managed to master the demands placed on them on the part of the school without experiencing difficulties, and with the latter group of pupils who thereby exhibited learning difficulties. Within both of these groups, different social factors were examined and their relationship to so-called school failure were statistically assessed. This research paper introduces particular outcomes resulting from this research, thereby becoming a testimony for the importance of the role played by the environment from which the pupils of the school emanate and the inadequate response to such on the part of the Czech Republic.

Keywords – Dependence of School Success on Social Environment, Prevention of School Failure, Pupil'S Social Environment, Statistical Relationship between Variables.

I. INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATION

In practically all walks of life, a preventative measure is the most effective and fastest way to solve given problems and conflict situations. With a high degree of frequency, preventative measures are discussed within the realm of health care, whereby a health condition resulting from eating habits is taken into account, also life style, the burden from which is placed on the organism or its exposure to risk factors, etc. Hardly ever or only very sporadically, do researchers talk about the need for preventative measures within the context of education, or such measures within the context of school failure, although the essence of both of these cases is essentially identical. Prevention or preventative measures within the realm of this subject matter, as is also the case of the condition of health – is an individual matter, though it has its own non-design a table social dimension (especially at the primary level of education). In other words, a six-year-old pupil is dependent on his family (within the family he structures his entire approach to learning, determines its significance for his life; the family mediates his curiosity towards the exploration and pleasure gained by exploration of his environment, which in turn provides him with the skill for Identifying patterns, etc.). The family and its social context, providing him with the conditions for the pupil's development (cognitive, psychomotor and affective), furnishing him with stimuli for his development (in a stimulating, a less stimulating or even a non-stimulating environment), which then predestine equally disposed individuals to set forth on different educational paths, whereby school success plays a not insignificant role. Therefore, if we want to work preventively to minimize school failure, we cannot rely solely on the influence exerted by parents, who are legally responsible for their children (but not all of them pay serious attention to the welfare of their children). In the Czech Republic, this issue includes, for example, the much ebated compulsory attendance of children during the last year of pre-primary education, its financing and realistic enforceability. If children aged between 5 - 6 have not acquired sufficient hygiene habits in the family, if nobody has ever scolded them or called upon them to observe the rules, or no one has ever read them fairy tale, or played with them, or if no claims or requirements have ever been demanded of them, or if they were left alone to themselves, they cannot

be expected to be well adjusted in the school environment and fit into a group of children for whom the above habits are already commonplace. Their handicap will be obvious at first glance, and the older the children are, the longer the time will be, which is necessary to alleviate this. Such children have a right to be compensated for the inadequate care on the part of their parents in the form of increased care in the final year of pre-primary education (if the system is set in such a way that parents are forced to bring their children there regularly).

The above mentioned facts are also confirmed by the research results, for instance [1] and therefore it can be assumed that the differences between the children from non-stimulating and stimulating environments within families will correlate, for instance, with the consequences of a liberal and consensual educational style in the families, e.g. [2], [3]. These educational styles differ in the degree of interest or lack of interest and willingness or unwillingness to devote time to the furthering of the imparting contributions essential for the development of their own children. It can also be relevant to a stimulating, non-stimulating or poorly stimulating environment for the development of the children's character traits. In this matter, one can take heed of the fundamentals revealed in the D.H. case of 2007, in which the European Court of Human Rights condemned the Czech Republic for discrimination against Roma children in connection with their access to education [4]. The family neglect of the pupils, was revealed by education professionals (psychologists, social pedagogues) and professional organizations (such as Pedagogical and Psychological Counselling Centres, School Counselling Centres, the Body of Social and Legal Protection of Children) as there in the form of inadequate mental preparedness for the school environment. Thus the otherwise badly prepared children from a dysfunctional household, due to neglect on the part of their parents and the subsequent compounding failure on the part of experts, have found themselves at the very beginning of their educational "careers" in schools within the Framework Educational Program for Primary Schools for Light Mental Illness or directly in Specialized Schools for Mentally Disadvantaged People, i.e. in schools placing lower demands on their pupils.

Prevention of school failure so far exceeds the school environment, which is still perceived as the only preventative weapon (for the pre-primary level of education in particular) and the sole corrective force. We consider this opinion to be extremely narrow and inadequate, particularly in terms of effectiveness with respect to redress. Without the removal of the main cause and only partially of some symptoms, it is unreasonable to expect a fundamental change in the consequences, i.e. the final effect. Since the main causes are environmental, created by the parents themselves, it will be necessary to direct the remedial work also towards the parents of such children, especially with respect to the minimizing of their harmful influence (cf. not sending children to schools, failing to provide them with snacks, lunches, refreshment, slippers, school aids, etc.). In this area, the approach in the Czech Republic remains still indebted to the pupils' development needs and their educational prerequisite.

The second key factor in the matter of prevention of school failure can be seen to lie within the school itself, or in teachers as the main bearers of knowledge. It is the teachers who communicate to the pupils the unknown world of institutional education and all the joys of this new learning, but also the world of fear of mockery and fear of condemnation, for example, in the form of somebody "being stupid". It is the teacher's professionalism to feel responsible for what the pupils will learn. However, current teaching practice is generally perceived as an activity whose success is the work of a teacher (which means that the learner comprehends, can apply, is able to find the right solution, etc.), while failure is attributable to the pupil (i.e. the learner did not respond correctly, misinterpreted some facts, misunderstood the principle, etc.). In this approach a clear influence happy or

otherwise, or a pragmatic attribution [5], i.e. the manifestation of insufficient professionalism of teachers, is strongly evident. It is not possible to expand on all its causes within the limited scope of this paper, however, we must state that teacher's professional responsibility for what pupils learn cannot be assessed accurately without taking into account the influence of parents' cooperation with the school itself, or the impact of their lack of interest. The fact that the professionalism of teachers is not inert to the insufficient income from this profession [6], is also a chronic factor. However, it is equally problematic to propose a nationwide increase in the salaries of teachers in regional education without any requirement for teachers' input and some criteria to promote the quality of education, i.e. the professionalism of teachers. In other words, we have various pedagogues, which is linked to the requirement for a differentiation between teachers. A key assumption in this situation is again professionalism, but this time the professionalism on the part of school management.

Preventative measures from this point of view do not help the representatives of the school, especially the headmaster/ school principal (i.e. the first among equal educators). The demands for the headmaster's professionalism should exceed the demands placed on teacher's professionalism, especially in terms of their broader competencies, powers and responsibilities [7]. Theoretically and practically, it should be the best of the best educators. The current practice of appointing regional school directors (headmasters) in the Czech Republic, lags behind its possibilities even in this area. The transition from sectorial management to the territorial principle of regional education management [8] can also be part of this problem. The principle of appointing trained specialists has been replaced by the principle of electing representatives of political parties, which does not always create favourable conditions for the promotion of professionalism and, thus the subsequent higher quality in education. Those who decide to set up schools at different levels (municipalities, counties) as representatives of individual political parties are in many ways responsible for their political leadership. The wording of the School Act (Act No. 561/2004 Coll., as later amended), allows them not only to disregard the recommendations of the professional bankruptcy commission but also not to justify their final decisions when appointing the headmaster (school principal) into office. This creates prerequisites for selecting other people than the best of the best. But we do not hereby maintain that this happens in 100 % of cases.

The third key factor in the prevention of school failure, lies with every pupil. Here, the notion of school failure has to be specified, since its concept is quite different for pupils-producers (who are always looking for the right answers to questions) and for pupils-wizards/Einsteins (who think about the essence of solving the school problem with regard to their previous experience) [9]. This concept distinguishes whether the learner is aware of the state of his or her own thinking and the level of self-understanding, i.e. whether he/she is working with metacognition [10], or whether he/she is merely seeking, guessing or tipping the correct answers to the questions asked by the teacher without having to deal with the essence of the matter. The same holds true even more so in connection with the above-mentioned teachers: they are the ones who form the pedagogical process and who should enable the students to become aware of their own processes of thinking and knowledge of the level of their understanding. This assumption can only be fulfilled if the educator applies this to himself, i.e. if he places higher demands on himself. In both the cases, it is more demanding and more time-consuming than marking the right and wrong answers. Even in this area, the practice within Czech schools is not entirely without retribution.

The above-mentioned concept of preventative measures against school failure cannot be called into action without parents' goodwill and discipline, without professionalism on the part of teachers and school principals, or

without inherent interest of pupils in learning, their gaining knowledge and the development of their modes of thinking. This approach is close to the complex concept of a five-polar model of the educational process [11]. It harmoniously connects all actors in the educational process of fulfilling the common goal: to maximize the availability of each individual. Only on this basis can we approach the theoretical ideal of the prevention of school failure.

II. WITH RESPECT TO THE CONCEPT OF SCHOOL SUCCESS AND FAILURE

The concept of school success and failure has its historical roots. School success has been and is subject to what the teacher appreciates and evaluates, no matter what, for example, what the practice thereof will subsequently make apparent. In cases where notional scissors are markedly emerging between the appreciation of success at school and the subsequent appreciation of success in professional life (e.g. in employment, business, within the community), it can be deduced that the concept of success is completely different in both cases. Historically, this is related to the existence of a five-step rating classification that has been introduced as a simplified evaluation scheme in the Czech Republic. Unfortunately, while putting this into practice, the pupil who is awarded excellent grades is usually perceived as a being a successful one and it is automatically assumed that he/she is a pupil who knows, who has understood the school matter, is able to apply the acquired knowledge and infer from this, evident consequences, etc. However, practice does not confirm this assumption. On the contrary, in practice the pupils who acquire only good grades (marks) belong to the most successful ones. From a pupil's point of view, the perception of school success is even more distorted: a successful one is the one who acquires excellent grades (marks) and the biggest number of points, not the one who understands, remembers, can make connections, etc. In this case, pupils are motivated rather to obtaining good marks or a higher number of points than to understanding their own curriculum. The strategies applied by these pupils are very sophisticated in this respect, such as "guess and watch", "pretend to be interested and ask questions", "do not say anything and rather say nothing", "answer so that you get as many points as possible." In all cases, by making use of such strategies at school, the pupils strive (either individually or in groups) to achieve a good score or a good mark, and practically no effort is developed to understand the essence of the problem solved, to learn the principles of the process.

Success, even school success, should not be too fast or too easy, and it should not come all the time, because the inner sense of success would be devalued. Success should be deserved, i.e. expected to appear after some effort, activity, both in the cognitive, psychomotor and affective spheres. Some authors even claim [12] that a person's endeavour should go beyond his or her ability and the pupil should strive for more than he currently thinks he can achieve. On the other hand, the pupil needs to be protected from experiencing permanent failures. However, it should not be seen as something undignified and condemnable. After all, life brings a much larger number of defeats in practice than victories, so the question arises whether we should not at least get it right now, for instance at school.

III. METHODOLOGY

For over two and a half years (2016-2018), we were working with a set of 1.346 pupils from 48 elementary schools, with all of them willing to cooperate. In terms of gender, there were relatively even groups of girls (648) and boys (698). Their level of primary education was lower (597) than the second degree of primary school (i.e. ISCED 2- the lower secondary level) (749). Of all pupils involved in the research, 469 were identified as pupils

with learning difficulties. In light of the difficulties or even the inability of these pupils to cope with school tasks, we will further designate them, for the purposes of this research, as the pupils endangered by school failure. The remaining 877 pupils, on the other hand, were categorized by teachers as pupils without any problems, i.e. pupils unendangered in the field of their acquiring knowledge and solving school tasks. In this paper, we work with them as pupils without being endangered by school failure. This second group was used as a control group for a number of research findings. Both monitored groups of pupils (hereafter the “Endangered“ and the “Unendangered“) were dependent variables and were monitored in relation to the selected independent variables (e.g. type of family background, family status, popularity of subjects).

The inductive analysis itself was based on a standard procedure. As long as we were working with data of an ordinal character, nonparametric statistical methods were automatically used. When working with an interval variable, at first the normality was verified on the basis of Shapiro-Wilk's normality test [13]. On the basis of the normality test, the relevant parametric or nonparametric methods of statistical analysis were then selected. For comparison of two independent groups, the Man-Whitney U test was used [14]. For comparison of more than two groups, the Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test [15], which was followed by post hoc analysis (multiple comparison). For the post hoc analysis, the Dunn method [16] was used and in the case of a balanced sorting we applied the Nemenyi method [17]. There has always been a zero hypothesis that speaks of the same medians between the dependent and independent variables tested.

From the point of view of the examined/ observed prevention of school failure, this article brings partial results (from otherwise complexly processed data) that are linked to the formulated research hypotheses:

H₁: The pupil's family background is related to his / her school success,

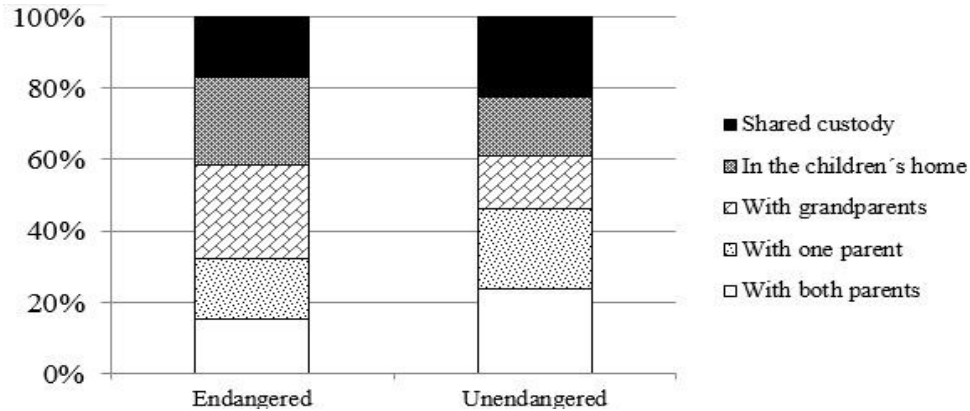
H₂: The pupil's school success rate is influenced by the economic status of the family background,

H₃: The popularity of the subjects with the endangered pupils differs from the popularity of the sub sects with unendangered pupils. Their verification (in three cases at a 1% level of significance and in one case at a 5% significance level) showed/proved statistically significant correlations.

IV. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH INVESTIGATION

When verifying the influence of the character and structure of the pupils' family background, a simplified approach was chosen in view of the numerous representations of pupils at the 1st degree of the primary level of education, which does not fully correspond to officially applied categorization - see for instance [18], [19], [20], [21]. In our sample, we were only monitoring/ tracking whether pupils live in a family with both parents (regardless of whether they are biological parents or whether their parents are married), whether they live with only one parent (regardless of whether it is a mother or a father), or whether they live with their grandparents who act as surrogate parents, or whether they grow up in institutional care (especially in a children's home), or live in alternate care in different households with divorced parents. The two groups of pupils studied differed in the structure of the categories represented - see Table 1.

Table 1. Character of the pupil's family background



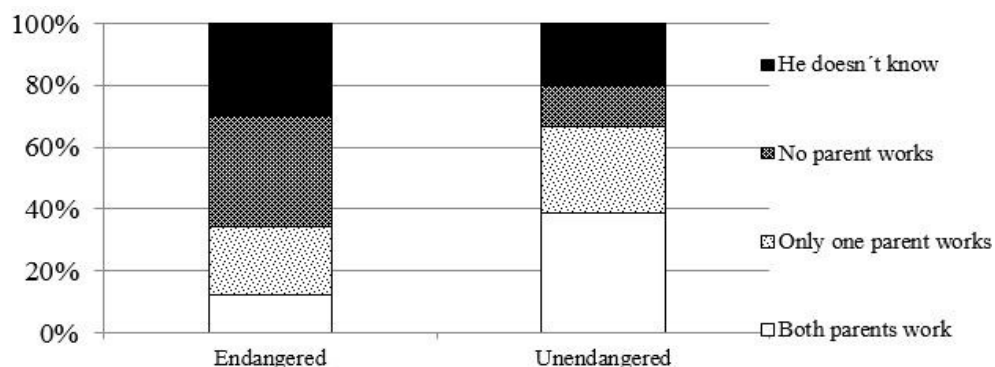
As shown in the graph, the categories of the endangered pupils were dominated by that of grandparents (57 %) and children's homes (52 %). On the other hand, the category of both parents (67 %), one parent (64 %) and alternate care (64 %) were dominating in the group of unendangered pupils. Due to the observed p-level H_1 value ($p = 0.01444$, where $p < 0.05$), it was possible to reject H_0 concerning the independence of the variables at a 5 percent significance level. The character of the pupil's family background is therefore statistically significant in connection with the pupil's assignment to a group of those threatened or not threatened by school failure.

Further verification dealt with the relationship between the economic status of the pupils' families and their assignment to groups of unendangered pupils (those without any problem) or endangered ones (those with learning difficulties). This relationship has been verified by three factors:

- 1) Whether adult family members are economically active in the role of parents (both, one of them, none of them),
- 2) Of what character is the pupil's housing (family house, panel house, children's home, lodging house);
- 3) Objects currently owned by a pupil (skis, bicycle, mobile phone).

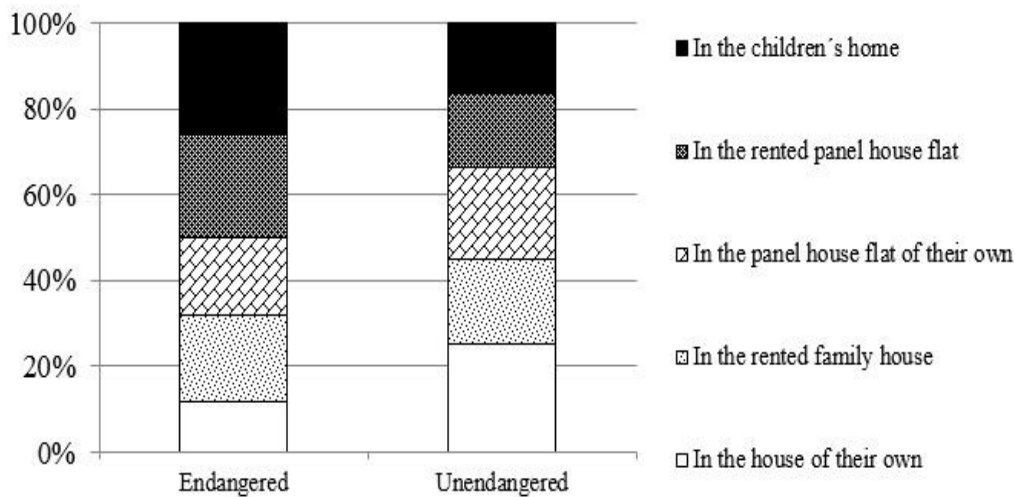
In all observed cases, the research sample revealed that the relationship between the three above-mentioned independent variables and the perception of the pupil as Endangered or Unendangered, at a 1% level of significance. In the case of the first verified factor, the parents who were economically active definitely dominated in unendangered pupils (both: 75 %, one: 54 %), while in the pupils ranked among the Endangered, parents with no job (73 %) and ignorance of the pupils in this matter (61 %) prevailed. The structure of representation of individual categories is demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Economic involvement of parents according to groups of pupils



The above revelation has been confirmed by the results of international surveys, e.g. [22], which point to the reserves of Czech schools in the development of disposable pupils from economically and socially weak families. Unlike in Finland, for example, in the Czech Republic less educated people are recruited from these pupils in the Republic than might be expected according to their intellect. This factor then contributes to their subsequent difficulties in the labour market. In this case, due to the p-level H_2 finding ($p = 0.00000$, where $p < 0.01$), H_0 was rejected by H_0 for independence and a significant statistical link between the labour market rate of the parents being used to link the parenting and the school success rate of their children. Similar results were obtained with the application of an independent variable: the pupil's housing status - see Table 3.

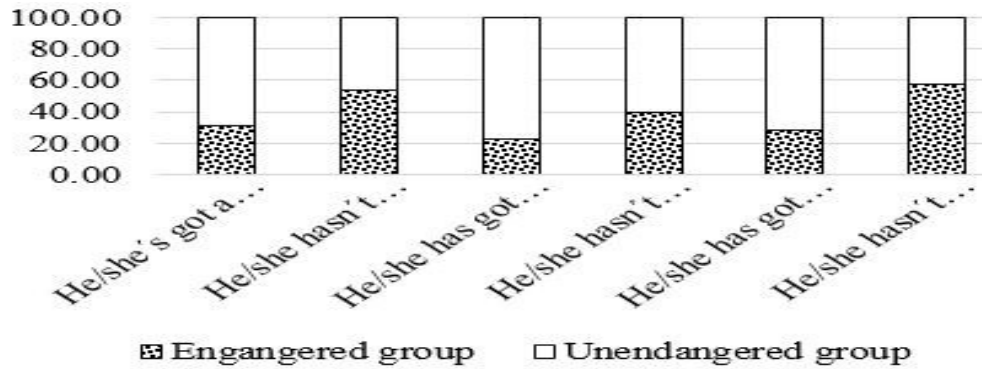
Table 3. Character of housing according to groups of pupils.



According to Table 3, the group of unendangered pupils shows the most massive representation of housing/living in a family house, in a house of their own (77 %) or in a rented house (61 %) of all such residences. Due to the observed p-level H_2 value ($p = 0.00000$, where $p < 0.01$) it was possible to reject H_0 about independence from a 1% significance level. There was a statistically significant link between the character of housing and the assignment of pupils to groups according to the problems of learning to the group of endangered and that of unendangered pupils.

The third probe into the area of the family economic status was the recognition of the existence of certain objects owned by the pupil (mobile phones, skis, bicycle), which was monitored in the context of the pupil's belonging to the group of pupils endangered or not endangered by school failure. Of the whole sample survey, the overwhelming majority reported mobile phone ownership (85 %), of which 68 % of the owners belonged to the unendangered group. Also, the majority of pupils from the sample survey (77 %) accounted for ownership of a bicycle, of which 71 % were pupils who were not threatened by school failure. The last category of ownership was represented by the weakest, of whom only 29 % of the pupils out of the total sample reported their ownership of a pair of skis and of which 79 % were again pupils from the group designated as "Unendangered". The distribution of ownership by groups of Endangered and Unendangered as a share/portion of the overall positive or negative expression of all pupils is shown in Table 4. Given the value of p-level H_2 ($p = 0.00000$ for all three areas, each separately, where $p < 0, 01$), it was possible to reject H_0 concerning independence with a one-percent level of significance. There was a statistically significant link between the inclusion of pupils in the Endangered or Unendangered Group and their ownership/possession or non-possession of selected items.

Table 4. Ratios between endangered and unendangered pupils from a hundred percent of positive or negative answers.



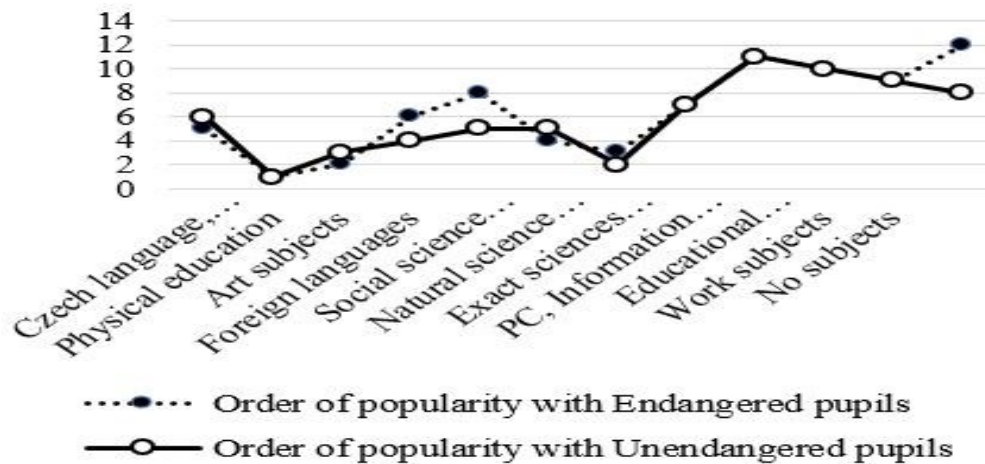
Although the three selected subjects are here being investigated as a symptom of the economic disposition of the families of the pupils studied, they can also be seen as tools for the personal presentation of pupils. While the mobile phone is now a technological necessity for most schoolchildren, skiing is a means of sports activities, which, if you wish to get access to it, is also more and more a subject of commuting, and rather than a matter for the elite. However, it musn't be disregarded that, like a bicycle, it is a tool, the use of which checks 'pupils' physical fitness, trains certain skills, and shapes the required characteristic features (such as endurance, shifting of pupils' own borders, overcoming their obstacles). From the point of view of the desirable ratio between activity and passivity of school youth in their leisure time, it would be desirable to have bicycles and skis shown at least to the extent as it is in the case of mobile phones. The last of the monitored areas was the survey of the popularity of the subjects among the pupils of both groups. On the basis of the pupils' free answers, the following 12 categories of school subjects were created:

- Czech language, reading, writing,
- Foreign languages (English, Russian, German,...),
- Physical education,
- Exact subjects (mathematics, physics, chemistry, ...),
- Social sciences subjects (history, law, civics, psychology, ...),
- Natural sciences (biology, geography, geography, primacy, ...),
- Educational subjects (education for Europeanity, health, citizenship, ...),
- Artistic subjects (art, music, instrument play, ...),
- Computer work, computer science,
- Work activities (workshops, gardens, cooking, ...),
- No subjects,
- Other school subjects.

Differences in the order of popularity of subjects have been proved, especially in the teaching of foreign languages, social science subjects, exact sciences other subjects, which were less popular with endangered pupils than those of the unendangered ones. On the contrary, it was the mother tongue (i.e. the Czech language), art subjects and natural sciences subjects, which were more popular with the endangered, rather than with the

endangered pupils. The same popularity was expressed by the pupils of both groups in the same order of physical education, informatics, educational subjects and work activities. Conformity has also been noted in the testimony of pupils that the item designated as „no subjects“ is considered to be a favourite, which can also be understood as a failure of the school in terms of its motivational impact/influence on pupils - see Table 5.

Table 5. The order of popularity of subjects in the groups of endangered and unendangered pupils.



Due to the observed p-level H_3 value ($p = 0.01605$, where $p < 0.05$), it was possible to reject H_0 concerning independence at a 5 percent significance level. The popularity of the subjects in the pupils of the monitored set/groups -dependent on whether the pupils belong to a group of those Endangered or Unendangered by school failure.

V. CONCLUSION

This contribution, based on the presented partial results of the research, alerts readers to the social overlap in terms of the prevention of pupils' school failure. Thus, as the social scissors are being opened within certain territories, as well as within regions in the Czech Republic [23], the conditions of the educational process in compulsory education are also becoming increasingly uneven. Both the equal access of all pupils to education and the equal conditions and burdens of all teachers in compulsory education are affected. The probe presented in this contribution works with two groups of pupils within the collaborating schools. Pupils were assigned to these two groups by their teachers in accordance with the problems presented in the management of the curriculum, namely those endangered and unendangered by school failure. The dependent variable defined in this way was tested in relation to selected independent variables, predominantly of a socio-economic nature. In all cases, we have demonstrated statistically significant links that underline the importance of preventative measures in this area.

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- [#1] This contribution came from research supported by the Grant Agency of the Jan Evangelista University in Usti nad Labem, grant No. SGS 43201 15 2005 01.

AUTHOR'S PROFILE



Helena Vomackova (born 1958), Associate Professor, has been working for the ninth year as a guarantor of the courses of School Management at the Department of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Education in Usti nad Labem (Czech Republic). Over the past six years, she has been working as a teacher trainer and researcher on a series of projects in the field of inclusive education, which is also the main area of her current research interest. It focuses on the prevention of school failure of pupils from different socio-economic and cultural environments in compulsory primary education in the Czech Republic. This is illustrated, for example, by the book called *A Research View of Inclusion and its Determinants* (2015), or by numerous research papers, for instance *Grading of Pupils in History: One-Year Research in the Czech Republic* (2017) and *Inclusive Education of Pupils* (2017).