IDENTIFICATION OF SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS: PILOT STUDY

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Abstrakt

Although socially disadvantaged students in the Czech education system are numerous, little attention has been paid to the identification and support of this group. Previous attempts have found no tool able to reliably identify these students, in order to provide their above standard educational support.

This article summarizes the main results from a pilot study of a new method aimed at identifying students with social disadvantage and the relevant methodology (Němec, 2023). Following research of The Faculty of Education at Charles University, we have drafted and verified a tool "Assessment scheme for the identification of socially disadvantaged students" in the Support of Equal Opportunities Project run by the National Pedagogical Institute of the Czech Republic. Verification has been conducted in cooperation with school counselling workers across 40 schools with above average representation of socially disadvantaged students. Instrument efficiency has been evaluated through analysis of data obtained using the tool, and feedback questionnaire answered by involved school counselling workers.

The pilot verification has shown: I) From the point of view of counselling workers, proposed assessment scheme represents a functional tool – more than 80 % of involved workers have stated that it has been efficient to work with the scheme, and they managed to identify socially disadvantaged students more precisely. II) Thanks to the tool, it is possible to identify socially disadvantaged students much more precisely in particular schools - in more than two thirds of involved schools, the total numbers of socially disadvantaged students have differed by more than 20 % compared to previous principals' estimations.

The data from the pilot verification of the tool: "Assessment scheme for the identification of socially disadvantaged students", has shown it to be a functional tool, and its further utilization in schools would undoubtedly contribute to a greater support of socially disadvantaged students.

Keywords: Social disadvantage, socially disadvantaged students, support of equal opportunities, inclusive education.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion represents a dominant educational concept in many European countries, as well as globally. The notion of quality inclusive education for students in heterogeneous classes assumes that diverse educational needs are identified in schools and are saturated through suitable support measures aimed at students in need. It is essential for the schools to identify all special needs, deriving not only from physical disadvantage and other divergence in physical condition, but also difference in cultural background, language competency and students' support in the home environment.

Now more than previous decades, social changes in society are apparent – wars and global crisis drive great number of immigrants from developing countries to developed ones; the impacts of the pandemic and inflation have weakened economies of some countries. As the social structure of society changes each year, the numbers of socially disadvantaged persons and families increase - it is necessary for the educational system to adequately react in order to secure social stability and prosperity. It is essential for schools to identify students and their special needs in order to provide adequate support for socially disadvantaged students.

This article summarizes the main results from a pilot study of a new method aimed at identifying students with social disadvantage and the relevant methodology (Němec, 2023).

IDENTIFICATION OF SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND ABROAD

Identifying the special needs of students from specifics and variabilities in their social background has proved problematic in many countries. The recent OECD report (2023) stipulates that the majority of observed countries have not created conditions for identification of socially disadvantaged students and at the same times stresses that the identification of special needs is an essential condition to secure equity and inclusion in education. International comparative studies (Kment, Korbel & Prokop, 2021) show that even countries that genuinely try to reduce inequity and support the education of socially disadvantaged students do not have any specific tools to measure inequity and therefore depend only on data from international tests such as PISA.

School legislation in the Czech Republic creates conditions for the identification of social disadvantage through the general concept of students with special educational needs. The School Act (Czech Republic, 2004) in current wording defines in the paragraph 16 a student with special educational needs as "every student who is need of support measures in order to reach his/her educational potential or to execute and take advantage of his/her rights on an equal level". Later the act stipulates that students with special educational needs are entitled "to receive free support measures provided by the school or school counselling facility" and that support measures should be adequate to "cultural background or other living conditions of a child, a pupil or a student". The act is followed by a decree on education of students with special educational needs (Czech Republic, 2016) that specifies concrete support measures and concrete groups of students with special educational needs including the group of students "in need of support due to different cultural and living conditions".

The act and decree create legal conditions for identification of socially disadvantaged students and provision of support measures to these students. However, there are serious shortcomings in the identification and provision of needed support measures in practice. The main problem arises from the fact that the provision of support measures is tied to students' diagnosis in the so-called school counselling facilities. The School Act (Czech Republic, 2004) sets a condition that a student must be diagnosed in the counselling facility and that this facility[1] must issue a recommendation to provide individual support measures. Concerning socially disadvantaged students two significant problems appear: 1) For many of these students counselling facilities are hardly accessible, quite often these institutions are dozens of kilometers far away. Due to bad socioeconomic situation of families and generally lower organizational competencies of some parents, it is almost impossible for some students to undergo the diagnostic process in these institutions. 2) When a student shows up in the facility, there are no standardized procedures to identify a socially disadvantaged student. In a recent study (Němec, Philippová, 2021) over three quarters of counselling staff have reported that there are no methodological procedures and instruments to diagnose socially disadvantaged students in schools. The comparison of a qualified estimate of the number of socially disadvantaged students to the real numbers of identified students in counselling facilities (Collective of authors, 2015, Ministry of Education, online, quote.2021-05-23) shows that more than half of students with social disadvantage is left without necessary support.

Outside the system of school counselling, attempts to identify socially disadvantaged students have appeared within PISA (OECD, 2019) international comparative testing (OECD, 2019) and some investigations conducted by the Czech School Inspectorate (CSI, 2022). However, both investigations have been shown to be imperfect due to the following reasons: 1) Investigations focus on 5th and 9th graders, thus the socially disadvantaged students from other grades are not included. 2) Tests take into consideration selected parts of the socioeconomic disadvantage and do not take into consideration other barriers determined by social background such as a lower competence in the language of schooling or insufficient support of students' preparation for school in the home environment. 3) Some students may not be able to answer correctly certain items from tests such as parents' education level or their recent employment. 4) Answers to certain items in the test, such as the one concerning car ownership in family, can be interpreted differently and do not necessarily detect social disadvantage.

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[1] In the Czech Republic, pedagogical-psychological counselling facilities and special education centers belong among school counselling institutions. They are independent institutions providing expert psychological and pedagogical diagnosis of students' educational needs as well as counselling services to students, teachers and students' legal guardians.

In foreign school systems we see that the most frequent model of identification of socially disadvantaged students is based on the data on the access to free school meals – for instance in Great Britain when financing the Pupil Premium Grant students, who are entitled to receive free school meals, are identified as socially disadvantaged (Choudry, 2021). Even in these countries, data show that the entitlement to free school meals does not necessarily detect the whole group of socially disadvantaged students. It has been verified that there are students from financially disadvantaged families in schools who are not entitled to free school meals for various reasons and that these students demonstrate significantly substandard educational outcomes due to low levels of education and employment of their parents (Ilie et al., 2017, Taylor, 2018).

IDENTIFICATION OF SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS IN THE PROP PROJECT: OPERATIONAL DEFINITION AND METHODOLOGY

Considering the shortcomings in the identification of socially disadvantaged students, which leads to a lack of support in schools, the Support of Equal Opportunities[2] project has decided to run a pilot verification of a tool drafted in research by the Faculty of Education at Charles University (Němec, 2023).

The concept of the tool "Assessment scheme for the identification of socially disadvantaged students" builds upon the following assumptions:

- Counselling institutions (Pedagogical and Psychological Counselling Centres and Special Education Centres) aren't easily accessible for some socially disadvantaged students. Therefore, it is sensible to carry out identification by counselling services[3] available in schools. Research data has supported this approach, as external counselling institutions use data from schools when trying to identify socially disadvantaged students.
- Identification carried out at schools must, above all, focus on the impact of students' social environment on their school performance. Neither a school counsellor nor a teacher is fully acquainted with a pupil's family background's but they can identify its impact on their school performance.
- Identifying socially disadvantaged students must never lead to unnecessary stigmatization of students and their families. The primary aim of identification is to provide suitable support measures for these students. Identification is carried out to draw the attention of teachers and school counsellors to students in need of support, and to highlight schools with high numbers of socially disadvantaged students and a greater need for finance and personnel to the relevant authorities.

Throughout the project, the identification of socially disadvantaged students and the impact on their school performance has been carried out by school counselling services workers and teachers within schools. The recommended procedure is as follows:

A school has chosen a concrete school counselling services worker commissioned to identify socially disadvantaged students at school. Preferably, those have been SEN teachers or social pedagogues and less often school psychologists, school counsellors and school methodologists for prevention.

1. The selected worker has attended the webinar organized by the National Pedagogical Institute of the Czech Republic and is acquainted with the Assessment Scheme for the Identification of Socially Disadvantaged Students.
2. Trained workers have introduced the scheme to pedagogues with special regard to seven assessed areas of potential disadvantage. The recommended presentation takes approximately 20 minutes and is delivered during a regular teacher meeting.
3. A school counselling services worker has set individual appointments with all class teachers. Each of them has thoroughly reviewed the identification of students in the class. Consideration of the situation of particular schools has been recommended. Therefore, in some schools, the worker assessed all students in the class, whereas in others, they focused on several selected students experiencing remarkable social disadvantage.

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[2] The project is run within the National Recovery Plan with support of the European Union and is administered by tshe Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and the National Pedagogical Institute of the Czech Republic.

[3] These services are located at schools and consist of counseling staff that works with students at schools. They consist of educational counselors, school prevention methodists as well as SEN teachers, school psychologists and social pedagogues at many schools.

4. After completing the assessment, the school counsellor sent summarised and anonymised data to the project management. They then filled out an online questionnaire to provide feedback on the administration of the assessment scheme and identify areas for improvement.

While identifying students, a school counselling services worker and a teacher assessed students in seven areas that might lead to social disadvantage. These areas are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Assessed factors and areas in the process of socially disadvantaged students' identification (Němec, 2023)

A. The student doesn't have adequate support in the home environment: absence of adequate home preparation caused by insufficient support from legal guardians (they are not interested, they are busy, they do not possess relevant knowledge and competency) or inadequate home environment (e.g., a pupil without his/her own bedroom or other quiet places for preparation). The student does not have their homework completed, lacks school supplies and shows low levels of school attendance as a result of these factors. Insufficient preparedness for elementary education at the beginning of schooling is relevant to this area.
B. The student hasn't attained an adequate level of the language used in school: insufficient language competencies result from using a different language code at home – it may be a foreign language (allophone children) but also Romani ethnolect of Czech, or sociolect (limited or different vocabulary of lower social class]. As a result of these factors, the pupil doesn't comprehend verbal and written school content, understand teachers' explanations, and their verbal and written expression doesn't correspond to their age.
C. The student demonstrates challenging behaviour that isn't related to health issues: their behaviour may result from disharmony between the minority culture at home, and the majority culture at school. Difficulties in student's behaviour may be caused by socially pathological phenomena in their environment (e.g., frequent use of vulgar language, use of addictive substances, dysfunctional family relationships). The student repeatedly fails to adhere to norms of conduct in the school environment because of these factors.
D. The student has little motivation for learning, and poor school attendance: low motivation for learning is a result of a lack of exemplary behaviour in the home environment and may be influenced by a legal guardian's negative approach to education.
E. The student demonstrates limited concentration while learning as the result of unfulfilled psychical needs: insufficient fulfilment of psychological needs may be caused by an unstable or dangerous home environment (e.g., dysfunctional family relationships, neglect, frequent moving, home violence, and other pathologies). Students' mental health can be influenced by traumatic experiences (children placed in institutional care, clients of municipality authority department for the social and legal protection of children , children of divorced parents, or the experience of loss within the family). The student cannot fully concentrate on school due to these factors.
F. The student faces barriers in education caused by insufficient fulfilment of their material and physical needs: the insufficient fulfilment of their physical needs is a result of their family being of a low socio-economic status. They have trouble concentrating on learning, face social stigmatisation in peer groups due to substandard clothing, and maintain low attendance at school (more frequent illness due to substandard living conditions). Their material needs are not met, and their education is compromised because legal guardians can't pay for textbooks, school lunch, and extracurricular activities and trips.
G. Legal guardians don't cooperate with schools. A lack of cooperation between schools and guardians is caused by a lack of interest (e.g., avoiding contact) from the guardian (they may not attend meetings, or answer telephone calls). Due to this factor, there may be incongruences between how the students are educated at home and in school. Thus, neither the regular demands placed on the legal guardians by the school, nor students' demanding behaviour can be effectively solved.

Every area has been assessed on a scale 0-1-2-4 4. Degree 0 means no difficulty is present in the area. Degree 1 means there are slight difficulties in the area that are solvable with teacher's support. Degree 2 means that there are significant difficulties in the area which require above average support. Degree 4 means there are severe difficulties in the area that means that students are unable to benefit from participation in a regular class unless

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4 The missing degree 3 shall stress out the difference between 2 and 4 degree of social disadvantage.

supported by high-level measures. In the overall assessment, individual points in the seven areas are counted and the pupil is included in one of the four categories of social disadvantage: *a student without social disadvantage*, *a student endangered by social disadvantage* demanding greater attention from teachers, *a student with social disadvantage and a significant need of support* requiring above standard measures outside the regular class, or *a student with social disadvantage and an essential need for support* which requires the greatest support measures available.

COURSE AND RESULTS OF ASSESSMENT SCHEME´S PILOT VERIFICATION

Pilot verification of "Assessment scheme for identification of socially disadvantaged students" was held from September 2022 to February 2023 and included 40 elementary schools involved in the project "Support of Equal Opportunities". Within the pilot verification, results of identification in schools have been collected and school counselling workers provided feedback on the utilization of the scheme through an online questionnaire. In two of the involved schools, the identification was carried out by two school counselling services workers at the same time. As a result a total number of 42 respondents provided feedback.

Schools with an above-average representation of socially disadvantaged students took part in the pilot verification as it was carried out within a project focusing on socially disadvantaged students. Only two school counselling workers reported that there was less than 10 % of socially disadvantaged students in their schools. Eighteen workers reported that socially disadvantaged students formed one fourth of students in schools, eight reported half of the school population to be socially disadvantaged and fourteen said that socially disadvantaged students made up more than half of their schools' population.

Feedbacks from questionnaires on the aim of the project, which is to help identify socially disadvantaged students, were very positive. More than half of involved school counselling workers (52.4%) said that the identification scheme had helped them to identify potentially socially disadvantaged among most of the students, one third (33.3%) even said that the scheme had helped them to identify those socially disadvantaged among all observed students. The rest of counselling workers (14.3%) said the identification scheme had helped them to identify social disadvantage among part of the students. None of the workers reported that after having worked with the scheme the school would not still know how to identify socially disadvantaged students (Table 2).

Table 2: Evaluation of students´ identification improvement (Němec, 2023)

Responses to the question:" Has the identification scheme helped you to better identify socially disadvantaged students in your school?"	Total number of responses	Percentage
1. Yes, absolutely, we clearly know now which students can be identified as socially disadvantaged.	14	33,3%
2. Mostly yes, when it comes to the majority of students, we know which of them can be identified as socially disadvantaged.	22	52,4%
3. Sometimes yes, sometimes no – the identification was clear with some students, with some not.	6	14,3%
4. Mostly no, when it comes to majority of students, we still do not know which of them can be identified as socially disadvantaged.	0	0%
5. Not at all, we still do not know which students can be identified as socially disadvantaged.	0	0%

When evaluating utilization of the assessment scheme, the majority of respondents (80.9%) stated that it was "excellent" or "fairly good". Only one participant in the pilot verification reported that the utilization of the scheme was "rather bad". None of the respondents said the utilization of the scheme would be "very bad" (Table 3).

Table 3: Evaluation of utilization of the scheme (Němec, 2023)

Answer to the question: "How was it to the work with 'Assessment scheme for the identification of socially disadvantaged students'"?	Total number of responses	Percentage
1.Excellent	8	19,0%
2. Fairly good	26	61,9%
3. Average	7	16,7%
4. Rather bad	1	2,4%
5. Very bad	0	0

Considering counselling works´ and teachers' workload, we have tried to make the usage of the assessment scheme as time efficient as possible. This aspect was also appreciated by school counselling workers involved in the pilot verification. Two thirds of counselling workers marked the time requirements of the assessment as "absolutely positive" or "rather positive" (table 4).

Table 4: Evaluation of time requirements to utilise the assessment scheme (Němec, 2023)

Answer to the question: "How do you evaluate time requirements to utilize the scheme"?	Total number of responses	Percentage
1.Absolutely positive. Students' identification could not be done in a shorter time.	14	33,3%
2. Rather positive. There are not many things that could be done faster in students´ identification.	18	42,9%
3. Average. Some steps could be done in a shorter time.	10	23,8%
4. Rather negative. Several steps could be done in a shorter time.	0	0%
5. Absolutely negative. The whole identification could be done in a much shorter time.	0	0%

The shift in the number of socially disadvantaged students as a whole and in individual schools has been followed within the pilot verification. The shift/difference has been counted as a comparison of the current number of identified socially disadvantaged students and the estimations that school principals reported to the Ministry of Education in 2021.

The first surprising finding was that total numbers of identified socially disadvantaged students in the 40 followed schools were almost identical from the point of view of estimations in 2021 and current results from the assessment scheme. In 2021,5 school principals estimated 3,640 socially disadvantaged students in schools while pilot verification of the assessment scheme identified 3,739 socially disadvantaged students. The comparison of the data shows some three percent growth in the number of socially disadvantaged students.

The shift on the level of individual schools was quite significant. Twenty-seven involved schools showed an increase or decrease in the number of socially disadvantaged students of more than 20 %. In fourteen schools, the growth in the number of socially disadvantaged students reached more than 50 % compared to previous data (table 5). In one of the smaller involved schools, the growth in the number of socially disadvantaged students reached more than 300 % - in the past the school principal estimated 13 socially disadvantaged students, according to the assessment scheme, the school identified 60 socially disadvantaged students.

Worth attention is the situation of three schools that reported a drop in the number of socially disadvantaged students of more than 50% compared to previous estimations by the school principals. The pilot verification demonstrated that the assessment scheme helped more precisely identify students' needs in these schools as well. The assessment scheme listed a new category "students endangered by social disadvantage" next to two already existing categories "socially disadvantaged students with a significant or essential need of support". In the three mentioned schools more than one fourth (26.4%) in the first, almost half (42.5%) in the second and

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[5] School directors reported these estimations without using any methodology or tool.

more than half (62.0%) in the third of previously reported socially disadvantaged students shifted to the category of students endangered by social disadvantage.

Table 5: Shift in the number of socially disadvantaged students (Němec, 2023)

Shifts in the number of socially disadvantaged students – comparison of identification results with school principals' estimations (year 2021)	Total number of schools	Percentage
1.Number of schools with growth in the number of identified socially disadvantaged students of more than 50 percent	14	35,0%
2.Number of schools with growth in the number of identified socially disadvantaged students from 20 to 50 percent	2	5,0%
3. Number of schools with a difference (drop, growth) in the number of identified socially disadvantaged students less than 20 percent	13	32,5%
4.Number of schools with a drop in the number of identified socially disadvantaged students from 20 to 50 percent	8	20,0%
5. Number of schools with a drop in the number of identified socially disadvantaged students of more than 50 percent	3	7,5%

DISCUSSION

The pilot verification has shown that from the point of view of counselling workers, the proposed assessment scheme represents a functional tool – more than 80 % of involved workers have stated that it has been efficient to work with the scheme, and they managed to identify socially disadvantaged students more precisely.

By focusing on seven areas from which a student's social disadvantage can result and which are often interconnected and complementary, the presented method of identifying social disadvantage corresponds to current knowledge about the complexity of the given phenomenon - as stated by UNESCO (2018, p. 100): "*Sources of inequity frequently compound one another. It is therefore crucial to view child characteristics in conjunction with each other rather than in isolation.*"

The results of the pilot study also show that, thanks to the new tool, it is possible to identify socially disadvantaged students much more precisely in most schools - in more than two thirds of involved schools, the total numbers of socially disadvantaged students have differed by more than 20 % compared to previous principals' estimations. These results are in line with the findings of some earlier studies (Greger et al., 2019) which, using the examples of some other countries, particularly Belgium, showed that data on social disadvantage collected at the level of individual pupils are more accurate than data based on the territorial characteristics of the locality in which the school is located.

The fact that the entire process of identifying students with social disadvantage takes place inside schools is also in line with the trend of increasing emphasis on internal evaluation of schools in the last two decades (EECEA, 2015). The involvement of counseling staff also corresponds - from the perspective of the international context - with increasing numbers of counseling staff in mainstream schools and with greater emphasis on the role of these staff in monitoring the social and welfare status of students with special educational needs (EASNIE, 2019).

In the future, a functional tool for assessing the needs and identifying socially disadvantaged students has the potential to be an important basis for setting up a system of support for these students and for the schools in which they are educated - as Rochex also states (in Demuse et al., 2012, p. 300): "*The assessment instruments and the results (evidence), or even the classifications which they make it possible to obtain, are no longer mere knowledge tools but also become (if they were not initially so) tools and techniques for change...*" Rochex (in Demuse et al., 2012, p. 300)

CONCLUSION

Although socially disadvantaged students in education system are numerous, little attention has been paid to their identification and support. In order to provide support measures to these students in a truly systemic way, it is essential to precisely identify these students, ideally in the school environment. It is necessary to incorporate teachers' and school counselling workers' experience, as they are able to understand barriers in education of these students from a long-time perspective.

The tool "Assessment scheme for the identification of socially disadvantaged students", built upon a study conducted by the Faculty of Education at Charles University was pilot verified in the project "Support of Equal Opportunities" administrated by the Czech Ministry of Education in cooperation with the National Pedagogical Institute of the Czech Republic. The pilot verification and positive feedback from schools represent a promising cornerstone for the introduction of socially disadvantaged students´ identification organized by the state on a national level – in all schools with socially disadvantaged students.

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