

Shocking revelation: Even the nicest teachers can unwittingly destroy the future of Roma children

We see teachers as dedicated and caring professionals who are guardians of social mobility and fair opportunities for all children. They hold the keys to the future, and we trust them to use them wisely.

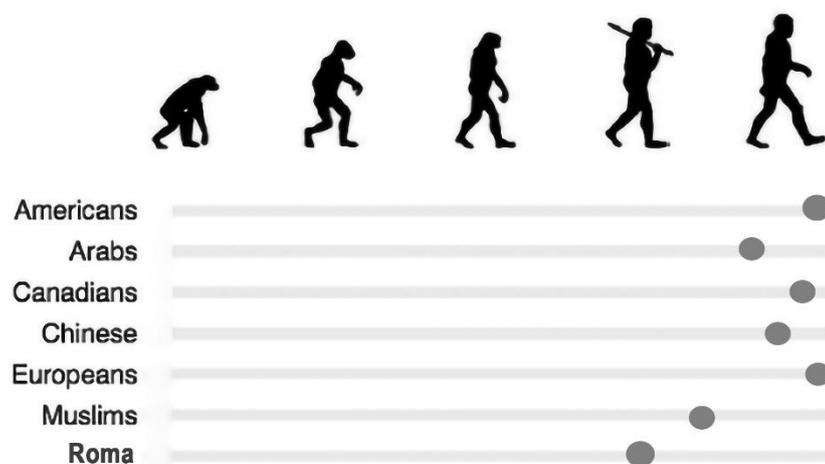
However, the reality can be much more unpleasant. Ethnic discrimination in schools persists, as evidenced by research carried out in the Central European region by neuroscientist **Emile Bruneau**. In 2018, he visited Ostrava to discuss his hypotheses directly with people from the field – Miroslav **Klempar and the Awen Amenca organization**. At that time, his research was in the process of being born; Today, after his untimely passing, we have in our hands the results that confirm what Roma families have been experiencing for generations.

1. The real culprit is not hatred, but dehumanization

The main finding of the research, led by Emile Bruneau and his colleagues, is surprising: the decision to place equally qualified Roma students in worse types of schools did not depend on how much teachers disliked them (i.e., prejudices).

A key factor was the so-called "**overt dehumanization**" – the perception of a certain group as less developed or less civilized than one's own group. To measure this phenomenon, the intuitive visual scale "Human Development" () was used in the study.

Teachers were asked to place different ethnic groups on an evolutionary scale that began with an ape ancestor and ended with modern humans. The extent to which they placed Roma at a lower evolutionary stage directly predicted their discriminatory decision-making within school tracking.



2. A surprising paradox: "Caring" teachers can be the most discriminatory

The most striking finding of the study was that the link between dehumanization and discriminatory placement in schools was strongest among teachers who showed **the lowest** levels of prejudice – that is, those who reported feeling sympathy and warmth for Roma.

This behavior is rooted in a sense of **paternalism** – that is, the belief that a certain group needs to be cared for and made decisions for because it is not able to take care of itself. These teachers may believe that they are "helping" Roma students by placing them in less demanding schools. However, this is not about "caring" for the potential of an individual student, but rather about misguided "protection" based on a dehumanizing stereotype about the perceived cognitive limits of the entire group. He believes that this protects them from "inevitable" failure at a more demanding school.

As Emile Bruneau pointed out, *"These types of behaviors are difficult to explain because they seem to be motivated by general care, and yet they are just as harmful to the population in question as open hostility."*

3. The message of the meeting in Ostrava: Is the direction of our desegregation the right one?

These scientific findings are not just theoretical data from Hungary for us at **Awen Amenca**. In 2018, **Emile Bruneau** visited Ostrava and we had the honor to meet him in person and discuss in detail aspects of his research that was emerging at that time (see *group photo*). Our debates at the time about why even seemingly accommodating people can maintain segregation mechanisms are now confirmed by his study with chilling accuracy.

Bruneau's research calls a "psychological diagnosis" of the system that forces us to make a fundamental self-reflection: **Are we moving in the right direction in the process of desegregation and promoting equal access to education?**



An analysis of the documents shows that if we focus only on suppressing open prejudices, we miss the mark. The key problem is the above-mentioned **paternalism** – an attitude in which the teacher feels "warmth" towards Romani children, but subconsciously does not consider them to be equally cognitively equipped. Paradoxically, by trying to reform the system only through administrative measures or tolerance training, we can strengthen the role of "caring" teachers who, in the name of falsely protecting children from failure, continue to waste their potential and steer them down the blind track of education.

At Awen Amencia, we would like to draw attention to the fact that it may be time to rethink the target group and the methods of our interventions:

- **Instead of fighting hatred, let's fight dehumanization:** We need to focus on how educators perceive the very essence of humanity and the development potential of Roma children.
- **From care to partnership:** If teachers perceive Roma communities as "objects of care" (paternalism), there will never be a real settlement. It is necessary to change the dynamics of power so that Roma parents are not just passive recipients of decisions, but self-confident partners who return their children to their full human dignity.
- **Systemic self-reflection:** We must admit that we consciously or unconsciously raise a socially excluded group on the basis of ethnicity just because we cannot see through the mask of "well-intentioned" discrimination.

Our goal is not to bring ready-made recipes, but to open this unpleasant discussion. Bruneau's legacy obliges us to stop asking ourselves if we treat each other "nicely" and to start asking ourselves as truly equal beings in our educational system. These "soft" forms of bias are as destructive to the future of entire generations as open hostility.

Here to be an informed parent and a strong community to stop this process and hold up a mirror.

4. The consequences are real: How a "caring" decision limits the future

The consequences of this distortion are serious. Placement in the lowest type of school (vocational school without a school-leaving certificate) officially makes it impossible for graduates to take university entrance exams. This fundamentally limits their future employment opportunities and social mobility.

This paternalistic bias is as effective as open hostility in maintaining social hierarchies. Consciously or unconsciously, as a society, we educate a socially excluded group only

on the basis of ethnicity and then incur enormous costs to compensate for inequalities that could have been avoided at the very beginning of the educational path.

Conclusion: The legacy of Emile Bruneau and our journey

Emile Bruneau did not have time to promote his research further, but his message remained in Ostrava. It shows us that desegregation is not just about moving children from building to building. It's about a profound psychological transformation – a transition from "compassionate dehumanization" to a full recognition of each child's humanity and abilities.

An example of change is the Jan Amos Comenius Primary School in Brno under the leadership of Roman Procházka, which sees individual needs instead of limits and perceives diversity as preparation for the real world.

When we fight discrimination, we must not only ask who does not like us. We have to ask who (perhaps in good faith) is denying us our full humanity and the right to ambition. The path set out by Awen Amencia in collaboration with the knowledge of people like Emile Bruneau is a path of dignity, where the future of a child is not determined by the color of his skin or the prejudice hidden behind the teacher's smile, but by his or her real abilities.

Miroslav Klempar

Link to the research article: <https://www.asc.upenn.edu/news-events/news/understanding-why-teachers-discriminate-against-minority-students>

Link to the research: https://0771eaafc8.clvaw-cdnwnd.com/6376f7c5efc16a6149b1231090ed9466/200000643-26de626de8/2015JPSP_Dehumanization.pdf?ph=0771eaafc8