CASE STUDY

SCHOOL DROPOUT OF ROMA IN ROMANIA

Between antigypsyism, the socio - economic dysfunction of the Romanian educational system and educational success

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PURPOSE

The present research paper aims to analyse in a qualitative manner the main and specific causes of school dropout in young Roma (including age, culture, economical status - poverty, social discrimination, infrastructure). Our purpose is to explore the phenomenon of school drop-out or early school-leaving as well as to identify its reasons among disadvantaged youth aged 14–22, who failed to complete lower and/or upper secondary education, including of young people who dropped school to raise a family. In addition, the research includes 3 interviews with successful young Roma that are at postgraduate level (faculty, master and PhD) in order to analyse the educational success in a comparative manner.

CONTEXT

Romania is the European country with the largest Roma minority. According to Council of Europe and civil society estimations, there are between 1.850.000 and 2.500.000 Roma in Romania[1]. According to the results of the population and housing census carried out in 2011 (hereinafter referred to as the census), 621,573[2] Romanian citizens declared themselves Roma, which represents a percentage of 3.3 % of a total of 18,884,831 persons who are part of the stable population of Romania. The estimations regarding the number of Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma ethnic minority are not consistent, since, for example, the Council of Europe advances a number of 1,850,000 people.

Education is a key area for ensuring the sustainability of intervention for the social inclusion of Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma minority. Several reports (Ivan, Rostas, 2015) [3] analysed the main variables that characterise the education system for Roma.

There is a need for programs targeting Roma in the area of social inclusion and poverty. There is a need to invest strategically in the development, inclusion and participation of the Roma at all level of the social and economic life of the communities where they are living in as they contribute to the demographic growth and a potential social base for economic development.

Besides the social and economic issues that Roma citizens are confrononted with every day, the issue of racial discrimination is the most sensitive. The discrimination that Roma are facing is being captured by a series of key concepts in order to be better assessed and tackled.

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[1] Council of Europe data:
https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680088ea9
[2] Population census, 2011, validated by the National Institute of Statistics, available at :
http://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/REZULTATE-DEFINITIVE-RPL_2011.pdf
[3] Ivan, C., Rostas, I. (2015). *Masuri de success in prevenirea timpurii a scolii. Studiu al proiectului POSDRU ID 132996 "Copiii si parinti romi vor la scoala"* [Successful measures in preventing early dropout of school. Study of the project POSDRU ID 132996 "Roma children and their parents want to go to school"] available at: https://romaeducationfund.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Raport_POSDRU_132996_Complet-FINAL-1.pdf

One of the most recent conceptualizations is the antygypsism. To simply use antigypsyism as a synonym for 'Roma discrimination' or as a reference to certain specific expressions (such as hate speech or negative stereotypes) without an in-depth explanation obscures the specificity, extent, and underlying structure of the phenomenon. Its gradual adoption signals the recognition that Roma and associated groups fall victim to a specific form of racism, unique to Roma. This recognition is a momentous step in the struggle for substantive equality.

Key texts reflecting this process include the 2005 European Parliament resolution on the situation of the Roma in the European Union, which for the first time used "anti-Gypsyism" in an official EU document[4]. The OSCE, EU Fundamental Rights Agency, and, in particular, the Council of Europe have been pioneers in exploring the implications of antigypsyism and placing it on policy makers' agendas. The Council of Europe's ECRI Recommendation no. 13 (2011)[5], remains as the benchmark of monitoring antigypsyism in a more coherent and comprehensive manner at the level of member states.

In 2017, the European Parliament reiterated its call of 2005 to tackle antigypsyism in the context of Roma integration in the EU and fundamental rights[6], and the European Commission, for the first time, made significant headway by acknowledging antigypsyism as a root cause of the social exclusion and discrimination of Roma its evaluation report on the Implementation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies[7]. The growing institutional use of the term is a seemly development. The great test for decision makers is now to translate the recognition of antigypsyism into effective action – based on a profound understanding of what the phenomenon entails.

If we claim and agree that dehumanization forms the central tenet of antigypsyism, then the project's argumentation is more evocative than systematic on the deep level of what Roma discrimination means.

The effects of historical discrimination and persecution do not end with the act itself, but continue to negatively affect the people persecuted as 'gypsies' in their economic, social and psychological lives. The slavery of Roma people in what is now Romania, for example, had formally been abolished by mid 19th century[8]. However, the social practice of perceiving

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[4] European Parliament resolution on the situation of the Roma in the European Union, adopted on 28 April 2005, available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2005-0151+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN

[5] ECRI General Policy Recommendation N°13 on combating anti-Gypsyism and discrimination against Roma - adopted on 24 June 2011, available at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/recommendation-no.13

[6] European Parliament Report on fundamental rights aspects in Roma integration in the EU: fighting anti-Gypsyism (2017/2038(INI)), Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, Rapporteur Soraya Post, available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2017-0294_EN.html

[7] COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL Report on the evaluation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020, available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0785&from=EN

[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_Romania

Roma people as less than human has continued to produce prejudice and everyday discrimination, both there and elsewhere (Zamfir, Preda, 2002). Moreover, the historical conditions of slavery durably deprived Roma of the possession of land, means of production or wealth. The poverty of many Roma today is still, to a certain degree, shaped by the historical fact of Romani slavery. Historical segregation policies have similarly isolated Romani communities from economic opportunities in many places and continue to affect the livelihoods of those communities.

The term antigypsyism as the strongest acceptance for discriminations suffered by Roma covers the level of social stereotypes, clichés and prejudices. These are commonly accepted and internalised by individuals as the basis and validation of their own prejudiced attitudes against Roma and associated groups. While the persistence and omnipresence of such prejudices has been well documented, not every person holding them will act from them, nor necessarily approve of extremist postures towards or violence against Roma.

The level of attitudes and prejudices, therefore, must be understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition for antigypsyist discrimination, hate speech and violence. There are other social and individual factors that influence the way antigypsyism surfaces. A personal bad experience with somebody perceived as a member of the stigmatized group may play a role, for instance, or with the social status of the individual in question. Antigypsyism can, however, be properly understood as the result or aggregation of multiple forms of discrimination and intolerance towards Roma.

METHODOLOGY

The research purpose was to explore the phenomenon of school drop-out or early school-leaving as well as to identify its reasons among disadvantaged youth aged 14–22 who failed to complete lower and/or upper secondary education, including young people who dropped out to raise a family. The high dropout rate of Roma children has been demonstrated by several studies and researches (Surdu, 2011; Tarnovschi, 2011) and is underlined by the educational inequalities for several categories of vulnerable children groups, too (from rural areas, mono parental families, poor families, low parental educational). In the same time, it was our intention to analyse the subsequent causes of educational success of Roma children and young people. In this direction, we aimed at considering public policy measures of positive discrimination as a tool/ instrument that can sustain the success of Roma children in graduating schooling (from primary classes to university and PhD).

The research aims to analyse the target group's socio-economic background and cultural particularities that affect learning while also looking at their individual considerations and the factors influencing behavior in order to identify means of re-integration into education using non-formal pedagogical methods.

In our research[9] we consider dropouts in youth between 14-21-year-old. From a pedagogical point of view, disadvantage involves economic, social and cultural characteristics which can negatively affect or at times impede some students' progress in school as well as their studies and private life. The pedagogical approach looks at the factors that hinder school achievement and personality development. One such factor that is particularly important is the educational attainment of parents.

The general research objective was reflected in the subsequent themes of the focus groups:
1. Socio-economic causes of drop-out (including delinquency)
2. Ethnic and cultural particularities
3. Family role
4. The learning conditions of the educational process

Through the **focus group research method** we aimed to enhance the reliability of our research results and to obtain more and detailed information in a more open setting about the individual cases of dropout, its socio-cultural background and the factors in school that prevent or facilitate it.

N**on-structured interviews** were used as an additional research instrument. The data interpretation is based on the interview chart. We interviewed Roma students that were beneficiary of positive (discrimination) policies in order to attend college studies. The participation was on voluntary basis and the students were coming from the West University of Timisoara. We conducted 3 interviews.

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[9] In order to respect the GDPR law, all our social research subjects signed and agreed on the protection of data and gave written consent for the analytical use of their private information.

On the other hand, we focused on recording the "educational success" cases of young Roma graduating 12 classes and passing the final national exam (Baccalaureate). Our interest was to investigate the factors and the causes of their success and analyse them in a comparative manner. We argue that the socio-economic factor is the main reason for school drop-out correlated with discrimination. Based on our previous researches, we demonstrated that poverty represents the most urgent and serious cause for children's and young people's school dropout. The necessary interventions of the Romanian state should target the disadvantaged and poor communities of rural and urban marginalized areas.

The attendance of Roma children in school/ education is below the national average. The access and opportunities to graduate primary and secondary school are still limited by a series of obstacles such as structural discrimination and policies that have negative effects. In the Roma case, there is a clear lack of preschool education, difficult access and the lack of financial and educational support from families. In many cases there are also prejudices towards the Roma children within the school's environment[10]. In 2007, more than 12% of Roma children left school (7-16 years old) before graduating the mandatory schooling period. According to a study realised by UNICEF and Romani Criss, 47,6% of the children who dropped out previously had to retake classes at least once, 38% twice and 12% even 3 times[11]. In general, more than 80% of the children that are not attending school are Roma and at least 18% of the Roma children are uneducated. Only 0,1% of Roma children graduate from the next level of education. It has been calculated that 28% of the Roma population is functionally illiterate. In schools with a large percentage of Roma children – segregated schools – the quality of education is the lowest. Segregated schools have the pedagogical personnel with the lowest level of qualification and the worst infrastructure: school library, sport facilities, didactic materials.

As for superior studies (university), the positive (discrimination) policies of the Romanian state refer to special places (quota) for Roma youngsters in order to enter the faculty. Besides this, the Roma Education Fund is a consistent private, non-governmental supporter of Roma students by offering them scholarship. In 2018, there were 180 scholarships awarded to Roma students in Romania.

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[10] see the recent case of the Roma children in a school of Iasi (https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/evenimente/elevii-romi-de-la-o-scoala-din-iasi-ar-fi-fost-izolati-reactia-presedintelui-cncd-1212228)

[11] Surdu Laura (eds.), 2011 – Participare, absenteism scolar si experienta discriminarii in cazul romilor din Romania [Particpation, school dropout and the experience of discrimination in the case of Roma from Romania], UNICEF Romania and Romani Criss Association, available at: http://www.unicef.ro/wp-content/uploads/Participare-absenteism-scolar-si-experienta-discriminarii-in-cazul-romilor-din-Romania.pdf

DATA COLLECTION

I. FOCUS GROUPS

1. The participants were vocational students from Resita town, from a remote and marginalized community area. The interviews were recorded (video and handwritten) and took place in a local school; some of the respondents who agreed to participate did not want to return to the school environment after the interview.

   The participants were young women and Roma children from the neighborhood, an isolated neighborhood that is part of the marginalized urban area, and an area where people do not declare themselves as being Roma.

   Identification data: 9 people: 2 children of 9 and 12, 6 women between 22 and 30 year old, 1 man of 45 year old.

   Duration: 1 hour

2. The focus group in Timisoara was formed by young Roma women who dropped out of school and have children. None of them was legally married. They live as concubines with more than 1 child (minor). They are also on the streets, living in abandoned houses/ facilities. Their ID documents are provisional for one year, but their children have birth certificates. The interviews were audio recorded as the meeting took place in a social economy based restaurant.

   Participants: 5 women, 1 man (social assistant of the Timisoara Municipality), 1 child of 2 years

Level of studies: The categories of the focus group participants, due to the nature of the target group sampling and the selection of participants, were inconsistent. Among the members of the Roma community, about 80% of the participants graduated from 4th grade, but dropped out of secondary education. The focus group revealed a high link between institutional support offered to children with special educational needs and their school attendance. From the group of Timisoara, all participants were abandoned children who went to school in Centers (Social State Centers for abandoned children). One of them graduated from 11th grade (high school).

This fact was also underlined by the school mediator who expressed the need for a friendly, ergonomic learning environment from an institutional and a managerial point of view. The low level of interest from the school management and educators was also considered as an indicator of the organizational climate and of interest to invest (the discussion on the quality of classrooms for pre-school education: mood, water infiltration, lack of isolation, cold, etc.).

The school had no possibility of investing in several classes with a variable number of children where the risk of abandonment is high and the school management does not consider them a priority due to lack of funding.

School relationships: student / teacher, student / student: One of the main findings is the active and central role played by the teacher in the learning process as well as the role played by literate children in their family as a support in the relationship with the authorities. Two cases are exemplified by the research team.

In the first case, the interviewee had 9 children and was pregnant with the 10th. All children attended school (those of school age), but she did not attend any kind of school (early motherhood, successive births). She had a child (the oldest) who was placed in foster care with another family (born when she was a minor). However, she said she visited her son whenever she had the opportunity and the child attended high school.

> *She cannot write or read and is ashamed (smiles ashamed) because she cannot go to the town hall to fill in a request. The 10-year-old boy accompanies her and writes for her, claiming that he is more educated than the 12-years-old, who has difficulties in learning and does not like school so much. (Teacher).*

The second case is from the same family. We mention here the role played by authorities as support for families with special needs:

> *Does the 14-year-old have to go to her 8th grade exam?*
> *No, because she does not go to school?*
> *Why?*
> *Because she has health problems.*
> *Did you take her to any school? To any centre?*
> *Yeah, at the General School no. 6 and after they talked to her, they told me to take her to the Bocsa centre, but I do not want to.*
> *She refused to register at the centre motivating that she can pick her up only during the weekend. I cannot stay away from her and I do not know what the teachers would do to her, because whatever I say to her after 5 minutes, she forgets. And now I'm even more agitated because I'm pregnant! (Ana Maria)*

Teacher / parent relationship, type of support provided: One of the main conclusions of discussions had with community respondents concerns an active, trust-based interaction and the highly active role played by the school mediator. The mediator knows the families and pupils well, and can intervene with personalized measures for each case.

My mother has been working for 3 years in cleaning. Her uncle was helped to graduate by the school mediator because he needed a driving license, there at the public cleaning company. Then he completed his studies and now has a driving license.
The school mediator is willing to help them enroll in the 'School after School' so they can graduate (A).

A strong correlation between the parents' level of education, their representation of education, and the support offered to children to continue or to attend a school has been identified. In the case of school violence, parents have found no way or were unable to support their children in relation to school authority and teachers. No means were provided to support their children, so they were encouraged to give up.

Reasons for school dropout: The main reason mentioned by 80% of cases was poverty, the lack of financial means to support their families to attend a school. Women also mentioned the specific tasks to be fulfilled in the household: cooking, caring for younger siblings, caring for elderly family members. In this case, school attendance was considered a luxury used only to learn basic elements (writing, reading and counting). The second reason (successive to the first) is that they give birth at a very young age. All respondents, in meetings with representatives / members of the community, had at least 2 children, of which at least one was born before the age of 18. The third reason for school dropout is the lack of educational support provided by schools and by the state. A lack of interest felt by all subjects during school experience was strongly emphasised.

Perceptions of reintegration into the educational system: The subjects mentioned a visible link between employment (and better jobs) and education. They said they were not able to get "good jobs" because they were not qualified. They had to work on the black market, as daily workers (men) or get a social allowance, social aid. Some went to work abroad (contract was the mentioned problem of a respondent). Many of the respondents mentioned during the focus group that they wanted information about re-enrolment in school.
  o Playgrounds inside the school and the school yard are in advanced degradation and cultural offers for this disadvantaged socio-economic category are non-existent.
  o cultural, public activities carried out by different state institutions are inaccessible for economic reasons.

Learning / living conditions: none of the respondents answered that they had adequate living and learning conditions. Families have more than 2 children and share a room, lacking individual space. The average number of children per room mentioned by the respondents was 3 children / room. Housing security is the main issue for residents of the Mociur district in Resita. In 2 of the blocks owned by the Resita City Hall live 382 of the 910 inhabitants. These blocks of flats are being demolished, Resita City Hall offers only to about 20 families from one of the two blocks some relocation conditions.

As mentioned above, the low economic status (below the minimum poverty level) is their main social need. Most subjects admit to living in poor conditions, but they are still afraid to lose the housing contracts provided by the municipalities that have been difficult or even lacking in the past year.

- **Educational level / family education**: The family's level of education, especially the father's, is a strong motivation for school attendance. Father is the family support and knowledge authority. For broken families, for example, where a member is a supporter (mother), the probability for their children to continue education is almost zero.
- The acute problem of Roma people who are not declared and who cannot benefit **from the positive measures of protection** from the state:

Grades are separate, do pupils get a spot according to their average?

We have at each department two places reserved for Roma, those children are in competition only if there are other Roma. We also have had cases when they obtained a spot in the section they wanted but did not opt for Roma places.

When asked if they manage to graduate their high school, she said they were able to graduate high school.

She gave the example of a girl who passed the baccalaureate exam and wanted to register to the Police Academy, but refused to fill the spot of the Roma.

The health mediator thinks she wanted to prove that she can succeed on her own not being helped by positions held by the state for Roma. This is how most of them think, they learn and want to prove that.

School mediator - another case: This year, at the beginning of the second semester, a girl came to me and said, "Mrs., I am a Roma but I have not said it so far." I did all the necessary papers and announced the inspectorate.

What do they hide?

They are ashamed, said the school mediator finally.

II. INTERVIEW

We interviewed 3 students of the West University of Timisoara who entered the faculty as a result of positive action for Roma. Two students were in the PhD program and one was in the

1st or second year of study in Social   Sciences   and/or Educational/ Political and International Relations.

The interviews were structured based on the following variables, following the lines of the focus groups:

a. Experience within the educational process/ the school

We aimed at observing if they were active students, the relationship with professors and colleagues, the access to resources, possible forms of discrimination and reasons for attending university studies and/ or specialties.

All of them declared (video recorded and writing) that their previous experience in the school environment was a positive one, even if some of them came from rural areas or poor former mining cities. They graduated from different specialties of high schools. They did not experience segregated classrooms or schools. They did not experience forms of discrimination or antigypsyism that would have caused school dropout (bullying or other types of violence).

b. Background information (family – role and support and previous studies/ level of education)

We aimed at analysing the support of the family, of poverty or other social disruptions. We intended to analyse the role models (if any) in school (former teachers) or family. It was our intention to determine whether socio-economic factors played a decisive role in the education success of the youngsters or if there was a particular case of extraordinary success.

The family support has been identified as the main reason for continuing the studies and graduating. Different role models in the family (parents or grandparents) were mentioned as having a decisive role in continuing education. Most family members did not have higher education (primary or gymnasium level). The main reason for possible school dropout based on the subjects' experience was financial and economic support. Financial support from the family (or other sources – scholarships) was the main contribution to their education.

c. Future plans

As the students are determined to act and to work within the Roma movement, we consider it a success rate of measuring the impact of the positive discrimination policies. All of them are actively involved in non-governmental activities as volunteers or employees. They declared their determination to work for Roma communities in different sectors/ areas.

CONCLUSIONS

Antigypsyism remains one of the main realities of the daily lives of marginalized people. It is real, visible, but also hidden, subliminal, detectable both in small age groups, in school, but also in adults when looking for a job or employment.

➢ Difficult living conditions lead to a high probability of school dropout, especially when correlated with mass urban education in the immediate urban area (functional urban area). Cases of antigypsyism, marginalization in classrooms as well as within the school deepen the negative representations of the children from the Mociur neighbourhood, and subsequently lead to school dropout.

➢ Positive action measures should be promoted more forcefully among young people, including for young mothers, so that access to higher education and better jobs become more accessible through education and further education;

➢ We believe that the support offered by the Romanian state and the local authorities is achieved in a non-strategic, atomized manner. The sustained efforts should be integrated with all other measures: support for young mothers, help for young children (0-3 years old), support for primary education to gymnasium, re-enrolment in the education system etc.

➢ It is our conclusion that discrimination based on economic status correlated with discrimination on grounds of ethnicity one is one of the main causes of school dropout of Roma. The positive discrimination policies correlated with state/ nongovernmental (REF) types of financial support may represent one of the solutions to eradicate the dropout of Roma (and non-Roma) individuals. In the same time, financial support can be driven towards young Roma enlisted in the second chance programs to attend school. The difficulties for them in attending school are also correlated with the need to sustain their families financially.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is a need for specialists to assist in the classroom in order to facilitate the integration of children who have difficulties in keeping up with the classes;
- There is a need to raise the self-esteem of children from marginalized areas through various activities (e.g. sports, arts, culture) to help them discover their potential (note the work of non-governmental organizations involved in various programs, including kindergarten or cultural programs);
- Schools in marginalized areas should function as centres to host a wider range of activities, including activities dedicated to parents. Mothers are interested in their children attending school and school mediators have a high level of trust in the community;
- It is important to integrate parents into the labour market, including through the establishment of social enterprises; possible spaces to host such an enterprise, including in unused spaces in schools, were also discussed;
- The school-after-school program is currently being implemented in one of the schools, on a voluntary basis, through the goodwill of some teachers; it would be useful to allocate resources to extend this type of program in the long term;
- The importance of teachers' attitudes in supporting the integration of children from disadvantaged backgrounds was highlighted;
- The activities of local NGOs cooperating with schools are seen as important; in the future, it would be useful to support the work of NGOs in developing programs complementing the formal school curriculum.
- There is a need of sustainable positive action policies in order to ensure the access and the continuation of education for Roma children from the early stages of education in order to give the necessary support to the families. There is a high number of records mentioning the positive perception of families and children/ mothers about school and the importance of school graduation to secure better jobs and increase the quality of life. Supporting the collection and dissemination of positive stories could show families that success stories are possible.

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