

IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS TO PROMOTE THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN IN ROMA COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: *The issue of Roma education is widely addressed in the recent sociological literature. Many studies seek to identify the best solutions for increasing the access to education for Roma children. In this article I present the results of a study conducted in Brasov County, Romania, based on the collection of qualitative data (interviews and focus group) in ten local communities with a significant number of Roma population. The identified solutions are of two types: those that are already applied and give positive results and those which, in our respondents' opinion, could represent effective measures of social policies at local and national level.*

Key words: *Roma children, education, local and national solutions.*

1. Introduction

The Roma education issue is a well-known and widely discussed subject in the literature of the last decades. Roma, the largest minority group in Europe, historically have faced widespread poverty, racism and social disadvantages (Janevic et al., 2011; Paraschivescu, 2012). The number of Roma in Europe is estimated between seven and nine million and most are living in Central and Eastern Europe, where they have a long history of social exclusion (Rechel et al, 2009).

During the post-socialist transition, Roma population faced a period of increasing poverty and socio-economic backwardness, living as a real „underclass” (Janevic et al., 2011). The „Roma issue” has become a focus for international policies, which aim to improve the life conditions of this minority (Ruzicka, 2012).

An important indicator of the Roma population’s socio-economic precariousness is the low level of education. Many recent sociological studies deal with this issue and their conclusions are similar: only 30-40% of Roma citizens attend school; adult illiteracy rates are very high (over 50%); the Roma children involvement in pre-primary and primary school is considerably lower than the one of non-Roma children; only a percentage of 0,6% of Roma young people completed higher education (Paraschivescu, 2012; Macura-Milanovic, 2013; Pasca, 2014).

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As an effect, low levels of education and the lack of qualifications cause higher unemployment rates among the Roma (Rechel et al., 2009). In other words, there is a vicious circle that explains the Roma population's lack of education: „the parents have no education, thus they don't have jobs, so they do not have money to buy necessary supplies for school children. Therefore, children drop out of school early so they will become unemployed adults” (Roman, 2013, p. 718). According to the most recent EU Report on Roma children discrimination in education, „a greater proportion of Romani children do not attend primary school than similarly situated non-Romani children living in the neighbourhood. At least 10% of Roma children aged 7 to 15 in Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, France and Italy are [...] not attending school” (Farkas, 2014, p. 5).

In Romania, 40% of Roma citizens have never attended any form of school and only 1% have graduated from high school (Bucuroiu, 2013). According to Fleck and Rughinis (2008) there are two types of causes leading to dropout and school failure of Roma children in Romania: a) *formal causes* - related to the educational system: shortage of equipment and infrastructure, shortage of teachers, great distances to school etc; b) *structural causes* - related to the Roma communities' daily life and cultural practices: early marriage, child labour in the household, the perception of school and education as an effort and investment which will not be useful later in their lives etc.

Despite two decades of financial and political support to increase the educational integration of Roma children, the results are not the expected ones (Kyuchukov and New, 2016). The two authors offer two interrelated explanations for the „continuing failure of schooling for Roma students” (p. 633). Firstly, the neoliberal logic produces social exclusion and maintains high levels of poverty for vulnerable groups such as minorities and emigrants. „As we observed above in Bulgaria and Croatia, and there are countless other examples, even the best-intentioned, best-funded educational projects tend to be short-lived and limited in effect” (idem). Secondly, this is a problem related to discrimination: „Perhaps even more damaging to the long-term prospects for Roma students, and Roma communities, is the continued misrecognition (and disrespect) of Roma students and their culture by non-Roma adults who run schools, and the non-Roma parents and children who avoid going to school with them” (idem). Gotea (2014) considers that external entities (events or organizations from the outside world) may sometimes pose threats for individuals regarding the access to resources or the outside interference in the internal affairs of the group, which can have an impact on a group's ability to adapt to dynamic conditions.

Kiprianos et al. (2012) also sustain that many studies conducted in Greece and elsewhere in Europe confirm the „cultural” explanation of the high rates of school dropouts among Roma: “alternative practices of education among Gypsy, Roma and travelling groups interrelate with culturally specific notions of childhood and knowledge embedded in non-mainstream practices of learning taking place within the family which contrast with mainstream conceptions about education and knowledge as well as the naturalised perceptions of childhood” (p. 691).

In an article published in 2015, I highlighted the Romanian policies and measures which aim to increase the access to education for Roma people and to improve the school performance of Roma students (Şandru, 2015). But in Romania, as well as in

other European countries, there are not enough monitoring activities and statistical data regarding the impact of these policies (Pasca, 2014).

2. Methodology

The main objectives of our research were: 1) to describe the situation of Roma children in some rural areas from Brasov County in relation to the educational system, and 2) to identify medium and long-term solutions for increasing the participation rate of Roma children in school and for improving their school performance. The research was commissioned by the County School Inspectorate Brasov, Romania within the project “Motorway to School”, funded with the financial support of Programme RO10-CORAI and implemented in the period February 2015-April 2016 in 15 rural education units from Brasov County (<http://autostradacatrescoala.ro/about>).

The research was conducted between October 2015 and March 2016 in 10 local communities with a significant number of Roma population (10 of the 15 communities included in the project “Motorway to School”). In all these villages there is a Roma community that lives compactly, usually on the edge of the village or, in a few cases, the villages have a majority of ethnic Roma population. According to the data provided by the school inspectorate, in all these localities there are serious problems related to the absenteeism of Roma children from school and their low school performance.

We have chosen a mixed-methods approach based on secondary data analysis on school documents, unstructured observation, semi-structured interviews, focus-group, and visual techniques. In this article I only present the qualitative part of the research, carried out through semi-structured interviews and focus group. Through these interviews we have tried to achieve the following research goals: description of the situation of Roma children from the perspective of their access to education in the localities targeted by the project; identification of the main issues in the relationship between school and Roma communities; highlighting the main solutions identified at local level to increase the participation rate of Roma children in school and to improve their school performance; evaluating the national policies for increasing Roma children's access to education from the perspective of those responsible at community level; identifying the main ways to promote education among Roma communities and communication between school and Roma families.

A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted in 10 local communities: 10 interviews with local experts (school principals and representatives of public administration responsible for social work); 5 interviews with parents of Roma children; 5 interviews with class teachers where Roma children represent the majority. Then a focus group was conducted in Brasov, at the end of March, with local experts involved in the project “Motorway to School”. They were principals of the 15 schools involved in the project. The data obtained from the individual interviews and the focus group were analyzed using the NVivo10 software. The open, axial and selective coding techniques (Scârneci, 2007) were used in order to develop emerging themes inductively. Within the focus group with the local experts, we made, on the one hand, a restitution of the field research results (Pascaru, Buțiu, 2007) and obtained a feed-back, and on the other hand,

we found out new relevant information about the subjects work with Roma communities. A number of 17 people participated in the focus group (15 school directors and 2 experts from the County School Inspectorate).

3. Main Results. Solutions to Increase the Participation Rate of Roma Children in School and To Improve their School Performance

The data collected from the 10 schools show that the educational situation of Roma children is generally worse than the one of non-Roma children. The main indicators are: the number of unaccounted for absences, school abandonment rates and the results of the national evaluation at the end of the eighth grade. In addition, all the survey respondents spoke about the difficult socio-economic situation of most Roma students in their schools or communities: Roma families have a large number of members, they live in poverty, the parents have a low level of education and generally do not have a job, and many families are involved in seasonal migratory processes, particularly in Germany, where children often go for certain periods of time.

The main solutions identified in the research are of two types: a) solutions already implemented or under implementation, with positive results at local level; b) possible solutions to be applied at local or national level. In presenting the results, the most significant statements in the answers of our subjects are written in italics. They illustrate the main ideas that inductively resulted in the process of coding the qualitative data.

3.1. Solutions already Implemented or under Implementation

• **Accessing grants for Roma.** It is a solution in which school principals strongly believe. They see the benefits of attracting European funds, as long as Roma population declare their identity. The school principals declared that the School Inspectorate from Brasov is very open and active in accessing European funds for Roma, and positive results can be seen quickly.

We should take advantage of these European-funded projects, we could have many benefits from them [...] Why not access them if we can? It's our money and otherwise we lose it! Even if they do not declare themselves as Roma, the Inspectorate is aware of this problem and gives us the chance to participate in these projects: last year was the "Correct" project, now, the "Motorway to School". There will be others too! (school principal); If I get another project ... I'd take it, I'd apply it. I mean, it's a first case in our school and I'm surprised at the good results we have ... how we have brought the children to school. It happened while i was walking down the hallway and a Roma child shouted at me: „Hey, Mr. Principal, I haven't missed a single day!” (school principal).

• **Extracurricular activities.** The organization of extracurricular activities to involve children and other family members has positive effects on teacher-student communication and motivates children to come to school with pleasure. In addition,

such activities highlight the special abilities of children, which are not necessarily visible in the classical education process. This solution is also proposed by school principals.

I think extra-curricular activities, such as trips, parties, and celebrations are very good. Last year I organized a class trip at the end of the school year. I have 70% Roma and 30% of Romanian children in my class. I proposed that each child should be accompanied by a parent, mother or father. We went to Brasov city. There were several Roma moms and they felt very well ... some of them have never been to the Zoo, they have never been in the City Centre, they have never been to the Council Square ... it was a beautiful experience for all of us. We received support from the Local Council for the trip and the parents did not pay for anything (school principal); Being directly involved in certain activities has made them more confident [...] and they are more open to communicate with us (school principal); There was a contest about non-violence. The works were evaluated at the Inspectorate. The first prize was taken by our student L.A., from Cutuș, who repeated a previous school year. He was so excited! It was a great surprise for him! If we manage to value these children, I think we can obtain great results. (school director); Initially the parents were sceptic regarding the camps, about the places we go ... but for the last camp there was a fantastic competition! (school principal); Roma parents participate in school festivities, they are really excited, they take pictures with their children and ... I noticed that mothers come very nicely dressed, much more elegant than you can see them in everyday life (school principal).

• **The school mediator.** The presence of a mediator in school, who facilitates communication with Roma families, is seen by many respondents as an excellent solution for improving Roma children's school participation and changing parents' attitudes towards education. Both in the individual interviews and in the focus group, the respondents positively presented the role of school mediator. They also proposed that school mediators should be hired long-term in local communities with a significant number of Roma children. The mediator does not have to be Roma, but he/she has to know the Roma community very well and must have advanced communication skills.

Within the "Motorway to School" project, we have a contract with a young Roma school mediator, who comes to school every day and stays with children during breaks. Children tell him about the problems encountered during the day or classes. Further on, he goes to the Roma family, speaks with the parents, the parents come to school, and so on ... it is even a support for us this school mediator school (school principal); Children talk to the mediator every day, they are very attached to her, they often go together on trips (class teacher).

• **Cultivating a positive attitude towards Roma children.** It is about creating a climate of knowledge and tolerance in which teachers understand the socio-cultural context of

their children and treat Roma students with respect and empathy. Some of the respondents (teachers) report on the professional and human satisfaction they have as a result of their involvement in the education of Roma children. Some talk about a change for the sake of one's own person, others about a peaceful institutional climate that overcomes the conflicts that were once present among students. Others discuss the need to know and understand different cultures for a good cohabitation.

We are here for them and I always tell my colleagues: These kids are beaten at home, they are often insulted. We don't do that! Treat them with respect and understanding! (school principal); When you put your soul in what you do, everything goes out as you wish. We try to show them that there is a beam of light. This means school, culture, education. This is our role and I think this would be the message that we should send to their families ... the fact that it is only school that rescues them from the situation in which they are (school principal); I have noticed that Roma students are very open when I ask them about their traditions. They are very happy when they talk to me about this ... or when I ask them a word from their own language (class teacher); If you are not Roma, you can learn a lot from them. I did a course at the School Inspectorate in Braşov and I learned a lot about Roma, at least about the traditional ones [...]. There are many interesting facts about Roma culture (local administration representative).

• **Frequent communication between school and family.** It is a solution seen by many respondents as fundamental to increasing the participation rate of Roma children in school. Some of them talk about the daily need for communication between teachers and Roma families. Others believe it is very important to counsel parents and children, especially through home visits, through more meetings with parents, and involving parents in school-specific activities

They need permanent communication, because they hardly gain confidence in the system (school principal); Over the years, I have found out that for a better school performance a stronger link between school and family is necessary. Counselling is needed both for parents and for students. We need to make visits to the Roma families homes, if possible, and of course to organize more meetings with parents and involve them in certain activities (class teacher); We have a partnership between school and family, so that we bring to light all the problems and all the activities that we do and where we want to involve their children [...] We have established a daily meeting program with parents after 12 o'clock with all the teacher according to their free hours (school principal); I think a first step is the school-parents relationship, an opening of the school towards the Roma community ... somehow they have to be closer to school. I have seen that they are receptive to offers of excursions, gifts ... (class teacher).

• **Well-trained and motivated teachers.** This solution is invoked by school directors, starting from problems related to the fluctuation or lack of qualification of the teachers in their schools. Teachers qualified and motivated to work with disadvantaged children in rural areas are a necessary resource for improving the pupils' school performance.

For performance it is clear: to have well trained teachers [...] A solution would be that these qualified teachers should come and stay (school director); The most important thing is to have a team of teachers who have a real commitment to their role, not to come only in transit (school director).

• **A more attractive school.** Some of the school directors propose the idea of changing the education system from within, so that children are attracted to come to school by interactive activities and learning methods. Moreover, the program in school could be extended so as to take most of the day and keep pupils connected to activities that are pleasant and useful for their personal development.

We have written small projects by which we bought a video projector, games and other materials to make interesting activities for them ... but we also participated in large projects such as Civis, Motorway to School, Community Education, Priority Road, where some high performance sports equipment was purchased that really inspires everyone to come to school, both us, teachers, and children (school principal); The program at school should be longer, even in the evening sometimes. I think they get more education at school and the conditions are clearly superior to what they have at home. But school has to offer them also other activities, such as sport, culture, and workshops for those who have talents and abilities (school principal).

3.2. Possible Solutions to Be Applied at Local or National Level:

• **Mini-campuses for Roma and poor students:** setting up, within the educational units, structures designed to provide after-school and extra-curricular activities, or even the possibility for students to stay here for several days.

I think one of the best options for them would be the creation of some small campuses around the schools, in which to do their homework up to a certain hour. And then they go home and have no homework anymore. The period they spend in an environment like this, in which they manage to live a more organized life and learn something, should be longer... and out of the chaos in which sometimes they grow up (class teacher); A boarding school where all these children from disadvantaged families could stay until the end of the week, until Friday afternoon, in the company of teachers and possibly a school pedagogue, and they could return to families during weekends (school principal).

• **Raising awareness of the importance of formal education** - is seen, especially by the public administration's representatives working with Roma, as a necessary solution to change the attitude of Roma parents towards the role of formal education and school in children's lives.

If two parents want their child to have an education degree above what they had ... this would be an achievement! For us it seems to be little, but for them it's a lot! (local administration representative); The most important thing is to focus on parents' awareness of sending children to school (local administration representative).

• **Increasing the social responsibility of Roma parents** - is also a form of awareness but with a wider focus on social and community responsibilities specific to social development-oriented societies.

I would insist that they have rights, but also obligations. They are not a category that only has the right to receive benefits, they must contribute to everything that happens in a community (local administration representative); They are probably accustomed to getting some income very easily through social benefits without doing too much... so their mentality has to be changed a little (school principal).

• **Additional state funds for Roma children.** Some respondents, especially Roma parents, believe that allocating additional funds to meet the basic needs of Roma children is the most effective measure to reduce poverty and improve their access to formal education.

It is necessary to give more money to Roma children for their education (Roma mother); To increase child allowances, that many families live off childcare allowances (Roma mother); They really make great efforts to go [to school]. I think the state must really help these low-income families. That would be the solution (class teacher).

• **Creating jobs for Roma parents.** This is an indirect solution, seen as very effective in changing the behaviour and attitude of many Roma families towards school. Community job programmes could promote workplace qualification and would reduce their seasonal fluctuations (they leave community for searching economic resources).

They go out in the summer, for example, to collect and sell berries and we don't see them in the village for a while. The school mediator had to bring them for various target groups in a project. But the village was empty... So, if the community would offer them a job ... let's say, I don't know... we could open a bakery or a pastry, we could open something for them not to leave. Let them have the opportunity to work here in the commune [...] through workplace qualification (school principal).

• **Compulsory measures for parents.** This solution is mainly invoked by representatives of the local administration and by some of the school directors. In their view, parents of Roma children should be aware and even obliged, through legal measures, to send their children to school. This solution appears necessary when other, non-constraining measures, are ineffective.

I would oblige parents, by means of sanctions, to send the children to school, at least ten classes minimum... to be able to earn a living themselves in the future. Because if they can't earn a living themselves, they will definitely resort to another method of coping which is to the detriment of the other (local administration representative).

• **Assuming Roma identity and reducing labelling towards Roma people.** There is a double mechanism here: on the one hand, a solution to improve the socio-economic situation of the Roma population would be to assume their own identity, as there are many resources / projects addressed to them. On the other hand, society should reduce labelling towards Roma people as a condition for increasing the integration of Roma into the life of local communities.

To be aware that they should not be ashamed of their ethnicity! Through a good campaign, we can explain them why it is good to declare their identity and what might be the advantages for them (school principal); They are not to blame for being born in a Roma family and they should have the chance to grow up like other people! (local administration representative); Do not differentiate between Roma children and ... to ... how to say in general to be accepted ... (Roma mother).

• **A social housing program** - appears as a solution that would solve the serious problem of the extreme poverty conditions in which many of the Roma are living. Also, improving living conditions by building public baths equipped with washing machines is a solution proposed in the focus group.

A governmental program of social houses with two bedrooms, a bathroom and a kitchen – for any family ... to have the toilet in the house, not to go out at -25 degrees during the night in the yard ... Because that's the reality. And the water... they must have a toilet in the house, a bathtub or a shower, and a washing machine. I see how glad the children are when they wash their hands at school with hot water ... and they wonder that they do not know where this hot water comes from (class teacher); It would be very useful to have communal bathrooms with washing machines (school principal).

• **Vocational classes.** Similar to the idea of valorising children's abilities through extracurricular activities, the idea of creating classes with a certain vocational profile appears in the discussions with Roma parents.

I wish there could be a music class with instruments or dance (Roma mother).

• **A warm daily meal**, a proposal that is now being discussed at governmental level, would be a very good motivation for Roma children living in poverty to come to school. The solution would also motivate parents to encourage children to go to school every day. Even outside a governmental program, communities should find local resources to implement such a measure.

All children need a warm meal ... In the kindergarten we have a space that was used as an after-school for the children in kindergarten. We want to arrange it as a dining room and, daily, 30 children to eat lunch here (class teacher).

4. Conclusions

Both the literature and the results of our field research highlight the need to provide economic and social support to Roma children and their families in order to increase their participation rate in the educational process and improve their school performance. It is argued that positive changes in Roma education are slow, but the results will be visible when the current generation of children will become adults. During the field research we conducted in Brasov County, Romania, we have identified solutions that are already in place and have good results, but also possible solutions to be applied in the medium and long term, both at the level of the local communities, as well as through national programs.

In field research, we chose to find out the views of so-called community experts or *privileged witnesses* (Laumann & Pappi, 1995), i.e. members of the community who know many important aspects about the community and about the Roma families living there: school directors, teachers, local representatives and of course Roma parents.

The solutions that value Roma involvement in community and school life as well as a better school-family-community communication are in line with the recommendations identified in the literature (Kyuchukov, New, 2016; Fleck, Rughiniş, 2008): participation of Roma in social projects, empowerment of Roma community and community development, reducing discrimination against Roma, the school mediator, intercultural education, government funding for Roma children access to education etc. Europeans are able to manage cultural diversity due to their rich experience in living together (Sorea, 2017). The solutions identified in the research can be considered expressions of this ability.

The most important contribution of this article is that it highlights already functional solutions, which can be used as examples of good practice, on the idea that „institutionalising successful practices” (Kyuchukov, New, 2016, p. 633) could be a factor for increasing Roma population’s access to education and a better living.

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