

**University of Debrecen**  
**Faculty of Arts and Sciences**  
**Interdisciplinary Social Sciences and Arts Ph.D. Program**  
**Educational Ph.D. Program**

*Being on the Edge of Two Cultures*

*- Examining the Life Course of Gypsy Graduates in Hungary at the  
Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century -*

Thesis of the Ph.D. Dissertation

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**Topic of the Dissertation, Reasons for Choosing the Subject**

At present the rate of Gypsy graduates is rather low in Hungary compared to the rate of other graduates from the majority society and other minorities living in Hungary. It has been a social-political aim in Hungary for many years to increase the educational level of the Gypsies in the interest of their social integration, better labour market participation and higher standard of living. This project was rather successful at primary school level, though the drop-out indexes still shows unfavourable rates at other school levels; and according to the latest researches there are more and more Gypsies in higher education as well, even choosing lines that they have never done before. In spite of these changes at primary school level, the Gypsies still have much less chance to get into secondary school and complete their studies successfully than non-Gypsy children. The distance between Gypsies and non-Gypsies is still not decreasing, even increasing, because the education level of non-Gypsies has been increasing even more strongly since the sixties in Hungary.

In the interest of getting over social disadvantages, the importance of education is essential. Since the democratic transformation at the early nineties in Hungary, the market economy with its rationalised attitude has been relying much more heavily on education and qualification. School is not only a device that helps you to gain proper education and qualification but also a device to get to know the many different cultures in a society. At present the Gypsies are isolated and excluded from the society. And if the process of social exclusion is rather typical of a certain ethnic group in a society than other groups, there serious social-political conflicts can develop, which can also lead to the end of a peaceful coexistence. That is why it is so important to carry on further researches in this topic.

## **Aims of the Dissertation**

Among the researches concerning the Gypsies, nowadays mostly those ones have been getting publicity which analyzes the conflicts between the Gypsies and non-Gypsies, and the background of their school failure. There are almost no any words about school success and its background factors. There is still missing the researches that rely on deep and intensive field work, despite the fact that this view could contribute to the education policies and social programs dealing with the support of Gypsies.

The aim of the dissertation is to reveal the background of the higher education statistics from the view of success, and moreover to outline the typical life courses of the Gypsy graduates, thereby to collect the indicators that supported their school achievement from the sixties up to the turn of the 20th century in Hungary. It has also been examined how their weak cultural, economic and information capitals can be maximally used at school to have better achievement. Furthermore, I wondered whether the degree can change their lifestyles, it can integrate or not, and if it is possible to support their studies the way that not to assimilate them but rather to acknowledge them as original cultural communities, ethnic minorities. If the Gypsy culture was interpreted as the culture of a social class, their social position could be improved simply with social-political actions (including education) but the aim would be the assimilation because in this case being a Gypsy means nothing else but being socially disadvantaged. But considering the so-called ethnic-racial concept, which says that being a Gypsy means being the member of an ethnic group that has its own ethnic culture, the change of their social position would probably be equivalent to destroying their culture.

## **Applied Methods**

The dissertation has two bigger parts: the first one presents the main concepts of education policies concerning the Gypsies, and the second one analyzes the results of the research made between 2001 and 2002 among Gypsy graduates. The interviewed people are from the whole area of Hungary searched by the so-called snowball method, which means getting information about the name and workplace of a Gypsy graduate, or at present undergraduate, from the previously interviewed person.

The interview, as a qualitative method, was chosen because this is one of the most informative methods in case of life course researches from subjective view. It makes possible for the researcher even to get to know the interviewed person's opinion, attitude and the way of thinking in the given subject. The aim was not to make interviews similar to full autobiographies but rather to have parts of an autobiography that focuses on a special segment of life. Therefore the retrospective biography research was applied, in which the interviewed person retraces and interprets the periods of his life, and looks back only on the events that considered especially important according to the subject of the research, in this case getting degree.

Processing the data, the main aim was to create a system from the huge amount of data, typical life models, and to make the interviews measurable, valid and controllable in scientific respect. There appeared so many arguments that it could be processed only in electronic way by computer (SPSS - statistics program). The processing was carried out with the method of cluster analysis, which makes possible to classify and reveal the attributes of a system with many arguments. Using this method, came to light the structure of the information set, and homogenous clusters from the objects also appeared. The objects were

determined by qualitative features because qualitative features can be made quantitative if they are counted, compared or ranged.

There are several types of cluster analyses according to the applied metrics and the choice of the cluster centres. Finally, the non-hierarchical classification was chosen because numerous and typical groups were needed.

The application of the qualitative method proved to be proper during the research because reliable data could be gained, and this method has also pointed out the mistakes that could not have been recognised in case of a quantitative research.

## **Results**

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- During the previous decades there have not been any changes in the rate of the Gypsy graduates in Hungary, despite the fact that there are more and more Gypsies in higher education, because the graduated Gypsies, and undergraduates, are rather tend to assimilate themselves to the majority society than Gypsies with low education.
- This kind of assimilation is non-voluntary because it happened not because of a conscious choice but a result of a social pressure.
- As a consequence of the assimilation process there is only a small intellectual class among the Gypsies that could play a model for young Gypsies.
- In case of this ethnic minority living in Hungary, in the Hungarian culture for many centuries, there is a special critical attitude of the Gypsy intellectuals towards their communities. They have rather a role of reforming than creating culture.
- The Gypsy issue is social, namely being a Gypsy means being the member of an ethnic group that has its own ethnic culture, and the problems of the Gypsies does not deriving from ethnical-racial concepts but rather social problems. The change of their social position would not be equivalent to destroying their culture. People realize the Gypsy lifestyle as something strange and that is why they show intolerance to it and not because of their race. Today in Hungary people would not like to cancel their culture but rather having changes in their lifestyles. Therefore handling the problem could not be equivalent to assimilation.
- The school achievement of the Gypsies is mostly determined by their cultural heritage and their attitude to learning. The attitude of the parents, relatives and the community proved to be very important, just as the family atmosphere and the parents' attitude to the Hungarian culture including the education issues, the behaviour patterns and the Hungarian language. The childhood environment (including home, school and teachers) has also supported their mental and personal development.
- The young Gypsies feel themselves estranged from the Hungarian school system, which has an influence on their school achievement. In most schools the Gypsy culture brought from home is not accepted, and schools do not pay attention to disadvantages deriving from cultural differences. Schools do still not accept and implement the issues of multicultural education. The interviewed people were initiated into the Hungarian culture by their parents even in their early childhood thus they could adopt the Hungarian school system easily. That is why they could integrate very quickly, as well as accept and fulfil the requirements without any problems.
- We are eyewitnesses of an unconscious misrepresentation concerning the labour market participation, which is induced by the Gypsies, and which victims are mostly the talented Gypsy children. According to this view, today in Hungary

it is not worth getting a degree as a Gypsy because they are discriminated at the labour market. Therefore, the young talented Gypsies are not motivated to go on further education and to get a degree. The research has proved that the labour market does not operate this way in Hungary. This wrong supposition must have appeared because of the fact that nowadays the news and reports on television, radio and in the newspapers are mostly not about the well educated and qualified people, but rather the low or uneducated and the low and unqualified ones.

- After classifying the interviewed Gypsy people appeared who has the biggest chance in general to get a degree today in Hungary. According to this model the most important features are the following: living in a town during the school years, living at home with the family and not in a student hostel, being a full-time student, having no school changes, no missing, not repeating school years, leaving the schools with pleasant experiences, meeting no stereotypes in the childhood environment, general standard of living, getting regular financial support for education, getting scholarships, having a two-generation family with two children, having skilled and working parents, no divorce but harmony in the family, harmony. Everybody speaks Hungarian in the family mostly besides Gypsy languages, attends kindergarten, and the parents have good partnership with the teachers and they often cooperate. The class is heterogeneous in the sense that both Gypsy and Hungarian children attend there. The number of Gypsy children in the class is low because Gypsy children with high school achievement attend there.

- According to the interviewed people's family background, the parents, brothers, sisters and other relatives were mostly well-educated and therefore they rather had a permanent job than other Gypsies. Consequently, the family's information capital was also stronger, because they had a daily connection with

people from outside the Gypsy community. All this has changed their attitude to learning, which became positive. They motivated their children to learn and not to miss school at all. They had a good relationship with the school, were interested in their children's studies, and even gave a hand in doing the homework and creating good conditions for learning at home.

- Some of the interviewed persons whose childhood was not harmonic, have also got their degrees. They were badly treated, taken no care of, neglected and very poor. Parents' positive attitudes to learning and information capital were also missing. They even attended a school with many stereotypes and were discriminated many times. In these cases getting a degree needed much more effort and time. Repeating school years, missing and supplementing learning took a lot of time for them because they had to correct their studies and to give up learning for a time regularly to earn money for the following years. In all these cases there were mentioned a teacher, a relative or a friend who supported them in their studies, for example how to change schools, how to apply for university or college, how to get a scholarship, how to get a place in a student hostel, how to complete their studies, how to get on well with both Gypsy and Hungarian people etc. In spite of their strong efforts they could get their degrees only with the help of an outside person, and it has proved the creating of a supporter system in Hungary.

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