

Theses for doctoral dissertation (PhD)

**Education of Romani Children - A Study on
Teachers' Attitudes in the Ciuc Basin (Harghita
County, Romania)**

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1. The aim of the dissertation, the scope of the topic

The education of Romani children is a sensitive issue in education policy in some countries, especially in the former socialist countries. With the accession to the European Union, measures have been introduced in these countries as well, which were conceived under the slogans of equal opportunities, integration and inclusion, in accordance with the EU principles, and which are aimed at increasing the schooling of Roma children. The efficiency and effectiveness of the measures can be assessed on the basis of certain relevant research, surveys and national reports, which highlight the complexity of the problem and the interconnectedness of causal factors.

The school is the main institution for social integration and cohesion (Hatos, 2006), the context where "the macro level of society and culture that determines educational policy and practice, the middle level of the school as an organisational unit with its specific internal culture and organisational characteristics, and the micro level of the classroom where the child is directly confronted with all this in the daily routine of teaching and social interaction meet." (Eccles, J., S. – Roeser, R., W., 2011; Dávid-Kacsó Ágnes, 2017). The focus of my research is on the most "influential" actors at the micro-level of the classroom, teachers who teach in primary schools in the Ciuc Basin (Harghita County, Romania), where the proportion of Romani pupils exceeds 25 percent. The aim of my research is to typologize the attitudes of teachers based on interviews conducted with them, and to interpret these attitudes in the context of the social environment (educational policy, majority-minority relations) and the school as an organization.

A wide range of research shows that the quality of teachers' work, their commitment and attitude are the most important factors in determining student motivation and school performance, above and beyond the impact of all other factors (equipment, class size reduction, increase in unit costs). (Hanushek– Kain – Rivkin, 2005; Darling – Hammond, 1999; Falus et al, 1989; Polónyi – Tímár, 2001). This is particularly true for Romani pupils, as the teacher's approach and attitude have a direct impact on the attitude of pupils and their parents towards school and their motivation to learn. A fundamental question of

my research is: how aware are teachers of their key role in the education of Romani children? Schools attended mainly by socially disadvantaged and Romani children have been described in the literature as 'hard-to-staff' (Castro et al, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010), 'most challenging schools' (Rice, 2008), where teachers face far more difficulties, often with a wider range of role expectations than average. The question is how teachers relate to this situation, how consciously do they accept or reject the additional roles, the identification with a “poor” school with low prestige? What “strategies” do they have? Several studies have concluded that the systemic environment of education, the rigidity of curricular regulation and the focus on performance are not conducive to school integration (Darling – Hammond, 1999, Dávid-Kacsó, 2017, Szolár, 2007). The question is: how do teachers reconcile the rigid rules and regulations of the education system with the challenges of educating Romani children, which require flexibility (e.g., adherence to curricular requirements, “accounting” for tardiness and absences, assessing children's performance, differentiation)? What external (curriculum, policy, school management control) and internal (compliance, prejudice, commitment) factors influence their decisions?

Since teachers do not work in isolation in the school as an institution, but are members of an organisation, they are influenced by the organisational culture, the values and the formal and informal functioning of the school (Kozma, 1975). I also sought to find out whether it is possible to speak of a “uniform” approach to the education of Romani children at an institutional level, and what impact the diversity of teachers' attitudes (Liskó, 2001) has on the effectiveness of education. What steps are being taken by the individual school communities to achieve inclusion, and to what extent are the principles declared in official documents being implemented?

To interpret the attitudes of teachers, I considered it important to review the macro- and meso-level factors that indirectly, but significantly, influence teachers' school practices and their attitudes towards Romani pupils. At the macro level, I have mainly attributed an influential role to educational policies and decisions and to the regulation of the educational system, while at the institutional level I have reviewed research on the social environment of schools, the relationship between the socio-economic background and the performance of students, segregation and the composition effect (Chapter 2).

In the third chapter, I reviewed research on the views, opinions, role perceptions and self-efficacy of educators working with students from different cultural backgrounds/Romani students. International as well as Hungarian research emphasizes the

need to raise awareness of pedagogical views, the importance of colour-conscious pedagogical approaches that acknowledge the mutuality of cultures, as well as of the importance of culturally responsive pedagogies. (Banks, 1989; Pajares, 1992; Bender-Szymanski, 2000; Bhopal, Myers, 2009; Boreczky, 2000; Nagy, 2002; Gordon Győri, 2014). Based on the results of various related research (Hopkins, Reynolds, 2001; Sági, 2006; Kiss-Mayer, 2007; Mogyorósi, 2010; Rajnai, 2012; Messing, 2013; Zachos, 2017), a system of expectations of pedagogical competence that teachers of students from different cultural backgrounds/Romani students should meet is emerging, which I use as indicators for the development of different types of competences in the analysis of the findings.

For a reliable interpretation of the research results, I considered it important to present the narrower social context, specifically the characteristics of the regional Hungarian-Romani relations and their impact. On the basis of the related research conducted in the area, a specific socio-historical context can be identified, which determines the development of the relationship between the local Hungarian community and the local Romani community, and which influences both the attitude of the Romani population towards education and the attitude of the Hungarian community (including the school institution and teachers) towards the education of the Romani population. Until the changes in Romania in 1989, on a regional scale, the relationship between the local Hungarian community and the Romani community was defined by parallelism, by “coexistence” (Gagyí, 1996, Biró - Oláh, 2002, Bodó, 2002), characterized by a high degree of spatial, social and mental separation and asymmetry. The spatial segregation in the period before 1989 was accompanied by a practically complete divergence in economic, labour market, social organisation, values and norms (Biró - Oláh, 2002). During this period, the education of the Romani population was limited to the formal schooling of a handful of children, who generally dropped out after a few years. Education of the Romani population was not considered realistic or necessary by local institutions and community. The most important development in the decade and a half following the regime change in Romania was the partial elimination of spatial segregation, but this did not lead to the elimination of the colony-like arrangement. The use of public spaces has changed, it has become possible to acquire housing outside the settlement and to move freely between localities (Biró - Bodó 2003, 2017). In the field of education, there are still only sporadic attempts in this period. The pre-1989 social model between Hungarian and Romani communities remains essentially unchanged. Since the mid-2000s, the number of

Romani students registered in the education system has increased dramatically, but the strong integration process into the education system is still not accompanied by any other kind of social integration process in the localities of the region, and the pre-1989 social model persists. Relations between the members of the two communities are still not symmetrical, and social differences persist in the labour market, social organisation, networks of relationships, values and norms (Biró - Sárosi-Blága, 2017). For one community, the lifestyle of another community is irrelevant and vice versa. This structural opposition of lifestyles is still very strong in rural areas and seems to be slightly reduced in urban areas.

In this context, the fact that the institutional education system “turns a blind eye” to the social relations outlined above poses a challenge to educational practice. The institutional framework, the curriculum, the learning materials, the pedagogical objectives are identical for all pupils. However, the two communities have completely different attitudes towards education, teachers, curriculum and school expectations. Each family's attitude towards school is framed by the values and norms of its own community. This duality puts teachers working with Romani children in an extremely difficult position in all respects. The mass enrolment of Romani pupils in schools means that Romani pupils carry with them elements of their home lifestyle, and teachers are confronted with a cultural difference in every aspect of school activity, which in most cases negates the form, content and officially prescribed methodology of teaching.

2. Methodology

The target group of the research consists of primary school teachers who teach in schools in the Ciuc Basin (Harghita County, Romania) where the proportion of Romani pupils exceeds 25%. Every year, the Harghita County School Inspectorate collects data on the number of Romani pupils from schools in the county. I selected the schools based on the database for the 2016/2017 school year. One urban and two rural schools were included in the sample. The proportion of Roma pupils in urban schools (School A) was 37 percent, while in rural schools (School B) and (School C) the proportion was 55 percent and 33 percent respectively. All three schools have a number of affiliated schools (kindergartens). The urban school, together with the small schools on the periphery of the town, form a “single legal entity”, while the two rural schools include smaller schools and kindergartens in nearby villages. There are classes with an entirely Romani composition, a

mixed composition (with a majority of Romani pupils) and classes with entirely Hungarian pupils. Between 2016 and 2020, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 teachers, lasting between 1 and 1.5 hours. When selecting teachers, I tried to ensure that as many “categories” as possible were represented (type of locality, age and years worked, primary school - middle school, exam subject - skills subject, teaching in a Romani only class - mixed class). Furthermore, I conducted interviews with the heads of the selected schools to collect information on the organisational measures related to the education of Romani children, their planning and effectiveness.

In compiling the interview schedule, I aimed to get the teachers' perspectives on the education of Romani students, their everyday experiences, successes and failures. In the first part, I formulated questions aimed at examining the attitudes arising from the role of the teacher (professionalism, renewal, role perception, role conflicts), and in the second part, I formulated questions examining the teachers' own human attitudes (sense of contentment, views, opinions, stereotypes). At the same time, I also asked about how teachers would address the challenges at school level, and what solutions and changes they would implement if they had the authority to do so.

The semi-structured interview format provided an opportunity for teachers to elaborate on the questions that were most important to them, so that I could gain insight into the emotional components behind their concrete answers. In this case, attitudes were not measured directly (using various attitude scales), but indirectly, since in addition to explicitly formulated responses, I could also infer implicitly expressed views, beliefs and attitudes of teachers.

3. Summary of results

Based on the “affective, conative and cognitive components” of the concept of attitude (Donat - Brandweiner - Kerschbaum, 2009), following a multidimensional approach to the study of teachers' attitudes, I grouped the research findings around the following topics:

1. teachers' views, perceptions, preconceptions and beliefs about the education of Romani pupils
2. teachers' perception of their roles: role conflicts, role identification or role withdrawal
3. teachers' sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy (sense of professional competence, need for autonomy, supportive community)

Using the conclusions of the literature on the education of pupils from different cultural backgrounds/Romani pupils, I have compiled a set of expectations that teachers working in classes and schools with a Romani majority should "ideally" meet. Using these expectations as an indicator, I have distinguished 3 types of teacher attitude patterns: the *child-centred*, the *rule-abiding* and the *conflicted*. In the teachers' attitudes, certain dimensions of these types are blended by different factors. Based on these salient characteristics, the categories of *mostly child-centred*, *mostly rule-abiding*, *tired rule-abiding*, *optimistic conflicted* and *pessimistic conflicted* have emerged. Teachers' attitudes can be influenced by different factors, and there is a crossover between categories. I attempted to interpret the results in the given social context, often referring to the characteristics of the Romanian education system and the effects of the Romani/non-Romani coexistence in the region.

In the following, I summarise the results by answering the research questions.

1. How aware are teachers of their key role in the education of Romani children?

A significant number of teachers recognise their key role in shaping the academic trajectories of Romani pupils, but also perceive that their "options are limited", i.e., they are trapped by structural constraints. Representatives of the different types attribute varying degrees of importance and authority to the teacher.

- Those who are *mostly child-centred* see an active role for the teacher. They try, change, adapt and experiment (organisational frameworks, curricula, teaching materials, methods...) in response to the challenges and problems they face. They do not resign themselves to failure, they seek to get to know their students and adapt the methods, the framework and the curriculum to them. They feel responsible for their pupils' school results and have an inner conviction to take on extra tasks.
- The *optimistic conflicted* also take an active approach to challenges. Although they have a lower sense of self-efficacy, they don't give up, they try, they care about the child's interests and fight for them. They consider the role and responsibility of the teacher to be the most important factor in the academic achievement of Romani students.
- The *pessimistic conflicted* "struggle", but do not feel self-sufficient. They try, they change, they experiment, but they are not convinced of their effectiveness. They feel responsible to a certain extent, but attribute a more important role to external factors

(inadequate attitudes of parents, pupils, differing socialisation, social situation). The pessimistic conflicted tend to have less room for manoeuvre, with more structural obstacles (teaching an exam subject in upper elementary school, in a mixed composition class, less opportunity to change the learning organisation framework, frequent Romani/non-Romani conflicts in the classroom, fewer opportunities to get to know pupils and their families better).

- The *mostly rule-abiding* also feel that teachers have a role to play in shaping students' school careers, but do not see this as a “leading role”. For them, compliance with school rules and regulations is the “bare minimum”, and students have to adapt and “want” to comply. Therefore, they mainly hold parents responsible and expect a change to come from them.

2. *How do teachers relate to the extended role expectations typical of schools with a “low-status student composition” (Bacsikai, 2015), how consciously do they take on the extra roles, the identification with a “poor” school with low prestige?*

The majority of teachers in the schools involved in the research did not consciously choose their role, most of them were confronted with challenging situations afterwards. They received no training in Romani studies and were not prepared to teach children from different cultural backgrounds/Romani children. The initial period meant a lot of frustration and “shock” for everyone, which the respondents found quite difficult to cope with. They received little professional help, but rather the supportive attitude of the community and the management helped (helps) them to cope. In the absence of helping professionals, jointly developed concepts and strategies, and institutional solutions, the emphasis shifted towards individual attitudes.

Those closer to the *child-centred type* put children's interests first, are more open to learning and acceptance, and are more empathetic. They see the job as a kind of missionary work, more willing to take on extra tasks (preparing lunch, keeping textbooks and notebooks tidy, maintaining hygiene, compiling binders). They can largely identify with the role expectations and, if necessary, devote part of their free time to fulfilling them. This usually results in good teacher-student relations, good classroom morale, mutual trust, more motivated students with a stronger self-esteem who are regularly present in school.

The conflicted usually take on extra tasks, but not always with conviction. Especially the pessimistic conflicted who, because of the many uncertainties and failures, have less and less “faith” in the meaning of their work and sometimes find it very demanding to do extra tasks. They feel less and less able to identify with the role of a teacher of Romani pupils, and do not feel self-sufficient in this role. Those who are only “temporarily” employed in the institution will often prepare themselves to just “survive” and wait for time to pass before they can leave. A frequent consequence of this is that “things don't work out”, that teacher-student relationships become increasingly tense, that students become less motivated, underachieving and absent.

Those who are close to the rule-abiding type do not consider “differential treatment” acceptable (colourblind attitude), they believe that school rules and expectations are equally mandatory for everyone. In their view, the extra work falling on teachers should in fact be done by the parents. Therefore, they are reluctant to take on extra tasks. They cannot identify with the role of the teacher of Romani students, and seek achievements, in which Romani students are only “holding back” the others. They see the cause of the problems in the Romani children and their parents, who are unable or unwilling to adapt to school expectations. This attitude is mostly typical of novice teachers, who, in the absence of adequate experience and expertise, believe in enforcing rules and regulations, considering this to be an effective approach. Failure to overcome this stage can have many negative consequences: bad teacher-student relations, many disciplinary problems, many absences, pupils who drop out quickly, students having to repeat years, mutual mistrust.

3. *How do teachers reconcile the rigid rules and regulations of the educational system with solutions to the problems arising from the education of Romani children, which require flexibility?*

Throughout the interviews, teachers very often talked about the contradictions and role conflicts they faced/face on a daily basis. One of the most common ones is narrowing the huge gap between curricular standards and the level of students' knowledge, which poses a major challenge for teachers. In the vast majority of cases they do not succeed, which for many of them is a constant source of frustration. Especially at upper primary level, where pupils should be prepared for the national assessment, based on the results of which the teacher and the school will be rated. Another challenge is the complete enforcement of school rules and regulations. They often mentioned situations where they had a serious dilemma about what to prioritise: children's interests or regulations. The same uncertainty

also arises in the assessment of students, since the ratings and grades should reflect the level of knowledge of the students in relation to a standard performance description. In the case of Romani pupils, this level would very often fall below the pass mark, leading to mass failure and repetition. In this situation, it is up to the teacher to decide how to evaluate and against what to compare. When making these decisions, some differences between the different types/groups are clearly visible. Teachers who are close to child-centredness put the children's interests first and try to adapt the requirements to them. They try to "tailor" the curriculum, the methods, the rules and the assessment to them. This implies that they are more flexible in the way they manage the "frames", often resorting to unofficial solutions. This is mostly the case for teachers who already have more room for manoeuvre (elementary classes consisting only of Romani pupils, in individual school branches, where the teacher can more easily adjust the timetable, the length of lessons and breaks, where he/she has closer contact with pupils and parents). The few, mostly rule-abiding, teachers try to apply the rules, grade according to the performance descriptions, follow the prescribed curriculum, which results in a lot of conflicts, many absences and failures, and often ends with Romani pupils dropping out of school. This tends to be the case for "newcomer" teachers with little experience. The majority are conflicted, wanting to comply with rules and regulations, but also wanting to act in the best interests of the children. Certain structural factors have a strong influence on their decisions. Those who teach non-exam subjects, and there is no national assessment, will find it easier to find "loopholes" that tip the scales in favour of child-centredness (they are the *optimistic conflicted*). Teachers working with mixed classes (with Romani and non-Romani pupils), who are held accountable for their performance at institutional level, struggle to find satisfactory solutions. Fixed timetables, difficulties in differentiation, Romani - non-Romani conflicts, lack of support from professionals in remedial education are all factors that hinder effective teaching, and in many cases make it "impossible", often accompanied by a low sense of self-efficacy for the teacher (*pessimistic conflicted*). The unresolved, ongoing presence of role conflicts is very stressful for teachers who are conflicted, and the negative consequences (frustration, low sense of competence, external attribution, burnout) also negatively affect the overall school climate for Romani students.

4. *Is it possible to speak of a "uniform" approach to the education of Romani children at an institutional level?*

The results of the research show that there is no “uniform” approach of teachers within a school, there are no jointly developed systems of procedures offering solutions to the challenges of educating and training Romani pupils, which would provide a support for teachers (especially for those at the beginning of their careers). At the level of school management, “guidelines” of a more general nature are formulated (reducing tardiness, preventing drop-outs, reducing failures, repetitions), while the “how” and “why” fall mostly under the competence of teachers. In some cases, the head of the school personally supports and encourages the teacher, in others it is the colleagues who do this.

Based on interviews with the teachers involved in the research, three main patterns of attitudes emerged: *child-centred*, *rule-abiding* and *conflicted*. In teachers' attitudes, a “mixture” of these three types can be observed in varying proportions. Which type is more pronounced in whom can, in my view, be attributed to the influence of certain structural factors (constraints)? The most child-centred teachers are mostly those who teach in Romani-only classes, at primary level, in one of the school branches. For novice teachers, or teachers who have recently entered a school with a Romani majority, the rule-abiding attitude is more pronounced.

In the schools included in the research, most of the teachers interviewed belong to the “conflicted” category, who are essentially “floundering” in the narrow margins of the centralised education system, trying to take into account the different cultural and social situations of the pupils, while at the same time trying to comply with the curriculum, the regulations and the expectations of the examination system.

5. What steps are taken by the individual school communities towards the *achievement of inclusion and integration*, and to what extent are the principles declared in official documents enforced?

Integration as an expectation is a legal requirement in all schools. For teachers working in Romani-majority schools and classrooms, the term carries a mostly negative connotation, and is perceived as an unfulfillable expectation of the “higher” levels, the “officials”. The majority of teachers and school leaders interviewed say “from experience” that in particular situations and without certain conditions, integration cannot be effective. Although there is a mass enrolment of Romani pupils from deep poverty and ghetto areas in schools, there are no resources, strategies or appropriate training to accompany the process. Perhaps this explains the majority of respondents' view that

integration is “impossible”. The centralised educational system, the limited powers of school leaders, the constant financial shortages in the system, all impose a perceptible “limit” on the plans and ideas of the heads of institutions. Due to the prejudice of the wider social environment towards the Romani people, certain forms of segregation, increased performance expectations, lack of operational programmes and funding, schools with a large number of Romani pupils cannot provide a “welcoming environment” for Romani pupils in which the principles of equal opportunities and inclusion could be applied. Teachers and school leaders often try to resolve the contradictions between “up” (educational policy, official regulations) and “down” (school and classroom level) with “half-measures” (informal) solutions that are aimed at “survival” rather than effectiveness.

When examining the attitudes of teachers towards the education of Romani students, I believe that one cannot ignore the combined impact of certain macro-, meso- and micro-level influencing factors. In this context, the “key role” attributed to teachers loses much of its validity, since teachers are often trying to tackle systemic problems under the pressure of certain structural factors and with very limited powers. In essence, they are expected to succeed in integrating Romani pupils into schools without being provided with the necessary conditions. Under the burden of responsibility “delegated” to the individual level, they are ‘floundering’, often without the possibility of change. In my dissertation, I sought to elaborate a typology of this “in-between role”, which can also be interpreted as the novum of the paper. I also considered it important to draw attention to the links between the socio-historically defined spatial majority-minority relationship and the education and school integration of Romani pupils, which may be useful to take into account in professional planning or methodological innovations aimed at changing current practice.

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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (3)

1. **Jakab, J.:** "Nem tudom, hogyan lehet rájuk hatást gyakorolni...": Pedagógusok a roma tanulók oktatásáról.
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