

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**Aspirations towards Further Education of
Minority and Double-minority Youth living in a
Disadvantaged Region**

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I. The aims of the dissertation, overview of the topic

Further education is the result of a decision-making mechanism based on acquired values. In the Romanian public education system at the end of the eight grade elementary school students come to a decision-making point as regards their educational careers. They have to consider whether to continue their studies or not, and which school to choose for this purpose. Besides the acquired values there are a number of other factors that influence the intention for further education. While identifying these in our research, we might also reveal factors enhancing positive aspirations.

The main aim of our research is to form a picture of the idea of further education of Hungarian elementary school students as reflected to Hungarian higher-, and secondary education. The research was carried out in Érmellék, a Hungarian region in Northwest Romania situated along the border with Hungary. In our dissertation the term 'Érmellék' is used for a sub-area in Bihar county, though historically it denotes a larger geographical area.

The empirical research focuses on the aim for further education of minority elementary students living in the disadvantaged region of Érmellék, and the factors shaping their idea of further education. We have also investigated the characteristic features of students who are determined to continue education, and contrasted them with undetermined students or dropouts. Another issue under scrutiny was the factors accounting for the choice of a higher level educational path and the reasons behind the atypical lower level educational path.

A particularity of the community under research was that it contained not only Hungarian minority students, but also double-minority youth, i.e. Roma children.

In our research the forming of the differentiation of ambitions towards further education was presented in the light of the connections between socio-economic factors, the particularities of the educational path and the agents of socialization of the socio-cultural environment. We have also investigated the region from a socio-ecological perspective.

Sociology of education provides the unifying framework for this multifaceted research. We employed two theories in order to illustrate the particularities of minority education: on one hand the typology of minorities (Ogbu 1978), on the other hand the overview of factors influencing minority education (Papp Z. 2012). By adding the language factor to the native, self-chosen minority dimension we have also managed to create a picture of the diversity of the forms of education. We have interpreted the characteristic features of

the Hungarian minority in Erdély in the light of the two theories. According to these, the Hungarian minority in Erdély should not be deemed as voluntary, but as native, and it has as its distinctive feature the protection of its language and identity, consequently it considers majority language education as a threat. While the native minority resists majority language learning, immigrants strive to acquire it, and do not consider language differences a hindrance. We have analyzed the factors shaping the decision for further education in the light of factors connected to ethnicity and factors independent of ethnicity.

II. Overview of methods

The basis for the research was provided by a questionnaire carried out in the spring of 2015. 465 seventh and eighth grade students from 20 educational institutions in Érmellék participated in the research. Respondents were Hungarian (n=380) and Roma (n=85) youth studying in Hungarian. Roma students were identified through hetero-identification. The terms 'Roma' and 'Gypsy' are used interchangeably throughout the dissertation. All Hungarian educational institutions in Érmellék were included in the empirical research.

We tried to account for the choice of higher level educational paths and to investigate the factors behind the atypical, lower level educational paths, beside the disadvantages that affect all the students.

In order to reach our goals we have employed a number of methods at various extents throughout the research: overview of literature, secondary analysis of Romanian and international statistical data, questionnaires, case studies, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, as well as, archive analysis.

To provide a solid base for the empirical research we have made an overview of the literature in the field. The theoretical background rests on four pillars: identity and minority, socialization processes, disadvantaged situation, further education and career choice. We have also presented the characteristic features of the Romanian public education system, as a framework for regulating further education.

In the theoretical grounding of our research, in the course of defining the notions of identity and minority, a special emphasis was laid on defining the notion of double-minority. The efficiency and eventual shortcomings of the socialization processes have an influence on the aim for further education, thus we have also included this aspect into the theoretical background.

The secondary analysis of macro data verifies the disadvantaged status of the region under scrutiny. The negative tendency in the demographic and economic features, such as ethnic composition, qualifications, incomes, and the structure of the region, places this area among the disadvantaged micro regions in Romania.

The primary method for data collection was the structured questionnaire, which measured respondents' ideas for secondary further education among seventh and eighth grade students enrolled in Hungarian education. Using open-, and closed question the questionnaire investigated the following: students' family background, efficiency at school, educational career, value system, the effects of socialization, and the aim for further education. Data was analyzed using the SPSS 23.0 statistical software.

We hypothesized about the relationship between the choice for further education and the variables of its influencing factors and presented these in a measurable form.

In order to verify our hypothesis, besides descriptive statistics, we have employed cross tabulation, correlation, main component analysis, as well as, multinomial logistic regression analysis. We have also verified the reliability of the scales by calculating Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency.

The aim of analyzing the class history presented in the case study was to investigate dropouts and hindrances to further education. Class history was analyzed in the light of four research questions in one school group from Érmellék. We chose the school group based on the dropout indicators and the characteristics of the region.

First we wanted to investigate the conditions in which students in two small regions learn; *look into school facilities and the equipment of the institutions.*

Secondly, we wanted to look into the *socio-demographic and socio-cultural background of children repeating the year.*

Thirdly, we wanted to investigate *to what extent overage characterizes students who repeat the year, as well as, the reasons behind repeating the year in this specific school group.*

Our fourth research question was related to the rate of school leaving; we wanted to find out *the degree of school leaving and the ethnic side to this question.*

We used semi-structured interview, participant observation, and document- and archive analysis to complete the case study. We interviewed four educators from the school retrieving genuine data about educational conditions and the classes. Participant observation focused on school equipment, identifying the school's disadvantaged situation and revealing its most important characteristics. This method provided an opportunity to get a glimpse of

how schools operate, their structure and quality of life. We elaborated the following observation aspects: the condition of the school building, equipment, electronic devices, health facilities, heating system, classroom furnishing, technical rooms, library, and the existence and condition of the gymnasium.

Archive analysis was carried out by recording the data from gradebooks. These documents contain the following data: students' birth date, religion, parents' name and occupation, address, number of absences, grades, number of failed subjects and learning averages.

III. Enumerating findings in the form of theses

Our research investigated minority Hungarian and Hungarian Roma students' aim for further education. This is the first research of its kind in the region. The novelty of the present dissertation lies partly in the choice of topic, partly in providing a synthesis of the factors shaping identity and the aim for further education.

We have arrived at the following conclusions concerning the aim for further education.

It was hypothesized that due to the regional disadvantage affecting all participants, the aim for further education in the case of seventh and eighth grade students is rendered uncertain by the factors of their family background. Besides all this, ethnicity, gender and the characteristics of students' residence also shape their aim for further education.

Results have revealed those micro factors that showed significant connections in terms of the differentiation of aspirations towards further education. We found, that if disadvantages resulting from family background are added to the general disadvantages, the aim for further education becomes unstable. A better financial background, which in our research was measured through the existing stock of durable goods, has a beneficial effect on the intention for further education. Further education is significantly connected to the qualifications of the father in the family. Children, whose fathers have higher qualifications, are more likely to continue education. According to our observations the traditional family model is in use in the region under scrutiny. In most cases the father is the provider, the mother is unemployed or a housewife. Thus, the father's scarce qualifications become a model to follow. The main aim is to earn an income as early as possible.

Poorer financial background and fathers with lower qualifications give rise to dropouts. The features of the region influence indecisive students. Youth living in towns are more liable to be indecisive in terms of their further education. They have a wider range of choices than students living in rural areas and this makes them uncertain. Planning lower level career paths can be directly connected to rural areas and parents' lower qualifications. This pinpoints the fact that the stratification of educational and social problems is a major hindrance in the choice for further education.

Though, the decision is not significantly rooted in ethnic origin, descent does have an effect on the family background. The economic status of the family is one of the major reasons for dropping out of school. The number of dropouts is higher among Roma students, than students of non-Roma origin. Based on the economic status indicators Roma students are characterized by poorer living conditions. These correlations point to the fact that the reason why Roma children are present in further education in a lower percentage, is not of ethnic origin, but this percentage is caused by their economic situation. From all these it can be concluded that indecision is caused, on one hand, by the family model, the lower qualifications of the father and unfavorable financial background, on the other hand, by the characteristics of the region; students living in urban areas are more undetermined as regards their plans for further education than students living in rural areas.

It was presupposed, that students become indecisive due to *their classes (VIIth or VIIIth grade), their efficiency in learning and their Romanian language skills. More decisive students are characterized by the minority educational path.*

Based on the dimensions used for investigation we found that the most certain prerequisite for further education is efficiency in learning. Poor Romanian language competencies cause uncertainty in the aspirations towards further education. Classes also influence the uncertainty in the choice for further learning. In the seventh grade students do not come to a final decision. It is during the eighth grade when they arrive at a decision. Our data also shows that partly due to the lack of schools, and partly due to students' poor Romanian language competencies, determined students choose a minority educational path.

It was presupposed, that *plans for further education can be more firmly stated by students who have established stronger relationships within their family, school, and peers, using different channels of communication for socialization. Students who do not wish to continue their education are less efficient in socialization as well.*

The empirical research focused on the effects of the agents of socialization. The research verified the presupposition related to the embeddedness of the socialization

processes. Making use of the available data we have certified that there are connections between socialization in school, relationships with other youth, the use of the internet are aspirations towards further education. Results pointed out that those students who are reluctant to continue their studies might change their minds in a direct proportion to their use of the internet. The more they use the internet, the lower the tendency to become dropouts. Students who are undetermined in respect of their further education might become determined as a result of their relationships with other youth or their teachers. Uncertainty decreases in direct proportion to the strength of their relationships. Family background influences the level of education students choose to pursue. Students with stronger family ties are more inclined to choosing colleges; they are determined to choose a higher level educational path. Students who are uncertain about the level of their further education, or whether to continue education at all, show a higher rate of medium or poor quality relationships. The effect of the agents of socialization cannot be ignored in the process of further education. All four agents investigated in this research have an influence, to a stronger or lesser degree, in planning further education.

Based on research results we concluded that in the case of youth enrolled in Hungarian education in the Érmellék region, determination for further education can be found with students who come from a favorable financial background, the father in the family has higher qualifications, they have achieved good results at school, have good Romanian language competencies, and live in a rural area. Indecisive students are more likely to come from urban areas and lack Romanian language competencies. An indicator for the decision-making process is the fact that seventh grade students are undetermined when it comes to questions about further education. This uncertainty can be dissolved through socialization mechanisms in which peer groups and teacher guidance plays an important role. The stronger the relationship between them and their peers or teachers, the more likely it becomes for them to consider further education. The learning environment becomes an influencing factor through help and interest on the part of teachers.

Students who do not wish to continue their studies come from families living in unfavorable financial conditions, in rural areas. Their decision is a result of their financial situation. The lower qualifications of the father have a negative influence on the aim for further education. Students are also less determined in lower grades. In the seventh grade there is no ready-made decision yet. The more often they use the internet, the higher the chances to aim for further education. The virtual world, which is rich in information, provides

opportunities for less determined students as well. It enlarges their knowledge on the choice of career paths.

The strong connection between the father's qualifications and children's choice for further education pinpoints to traditional social norms. An explanation for this is the fact that fathers play a more important role in earning family incomes than mothers do. Following in the father's footsteps and his higher qualifications are more inspiring for youth.

The financial situation of the family is a crucial factor in the ambitions for further education, since the latter requires financial investment. The effect of the type of residence can also be linked back to the family's financial situation. Since students living in rural areas do not have local possibilities for further education, getting to the school and taking part in education means new burdens for the family, which they cannot always take, or in case they do, they expect concrete results. Students living in urban areas do not face this problem. They have more opportunities and this makes them uncertain. Their decision is influenced by other factors. Ethnic characteristics also have an indirect effect through financial situation. Since Roma families live in poorer financial conditions, they can rarely take up this investment.

Our case study provides an authentic picture not only of the ethnic feature of dropouts, but also of the educational climate. Using hetero-identification students who repeat the year are in all cases of Roma ethnicity. They fall behind with the class in which they started their education and become overage. They are the dropouts.

Besides the ethnic component the case study also pointed out that students come from an unfavorable family background: occasionally employed parents with lower qualifications or no education, poor living conditions. Class analysis showed that the critical point in respect of dropouts is the fifth and sixth grade. Based on the results Roma students follow an atypical path (failing subjects, absences, behavior problems, year repetition) in formal education.

When investigating school climate we found that it is an unfavorable medium in terms of its outer-, technical conditions and status. Looking at student composition we have also found that the two institutions are characterized by low school composition.

The double minority status of the Roma in Érmellék does not ease their process of accommodation through acquiring the supposedly positive elements of more identities. Previous research results show that career paths reveal personal successes and outbreaks. However, successful paths deviate from the traditional Roma life. Hungarian Romas establish a connection to Hungarian identity through the language spoken, but their habits and lifestyle reflect Roma characteristics.

In the case of Roma families the cumulatively disadvantages situation is recreated together with the problems resulting from a double minority status. Failures and lack of success at school worsen these children's situation. Their social uplifting is an absolute must, and this can be done through the school by increasing their efficiency in education. There is an unquestionable need for these schools to be functional, even though, they have a low student composition. They are an exclusive agent of socialization for students who attend them, since these students do not have the possibility to frequent schools which are farther but have a higher status. The socio-economic background of double-minority groups does not make it possible to choose a form of education outside the region.

The main result of the analysis lies in the fact that we have pointed out that divergent educational paths result from socio-ecological factors such as the type of settlement, from socio-economic factors, such as, the father's qualifications and the financial situation of the family, as well as, socio-cultural factors, such as, the effects of the secondary, tertiary and quaternary levels of socialization. Based on the literature in the field and the results of the analysis of the factors influencing the choice for further education of double-minority elementary students in the Érmellék region we concluded the following: the economic situation of the family, and the disadvantages of the region can be deemed factors independent from ethnicity, while the father's qualifications, Romanian language competencies and the agents of socialization are factors connected to ethnicity.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

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