

BREAKING BARRIERS: EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF ROMA PARENTS ON THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF EDUCATION FOR THEIR CHILDREN

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Abstract: *Our article reveals a significant positive correlation between heightened parental involvement and improved academic outcomes among Roma children. Active participation of parents in their children's educational journey emerges as a crucial factor in fostering a supportive learning environment. Moreover, culturally sensitive educational interventions, designed to resonate with the unique cultural context of the Roma community, are identified as catalysts for enhanced educational engagement and achievement. The findings underscore the potential of collaborative efforts between educators, parents, and community leaders in shaping educational experiences that align with the cultural identity of Roma children. By tailoring interventions to be culturally sensitive, educational programs become more inclusive and effective in addressing the specific needs of the Roma community.*

Keywords: Roma Education, Parental Involvement, Inclusion/Exclusion, Educational Disadvantage

1. Conceptual analysis: on minority's inclusion/exclusion

The ethnic group is characterized by "pr-structure or 'constitutive foundations' (physical anthropology, demography, language, territory), structure (economy, social classes, culture, and consciousness), and poststructure or the completion, perfection of the structure (political and urban organization)." (Nedelcu, 2003: 29).

The term "minority" can be used in a general sense to characterize populations with a different language, nationality, religion, culture, lifestyle, or any other characteristic accepted as parts of a reference group. In sociological terms, a majority represents a segment of the population that numerically surpasses all other segments. The term "minority" is inevitably associated with political movements related to assimilation, wherein the minority group loses its distinctive traits and is absorbed into the dominant group. Thus, minorities emerge living alongside the majority, and in some scenarios, they find themselves in conflictual relationships. Etymologically, the word "minority" is derived from the French term "minorité," which traces its roots back to the Latin "minoritas, minoritatis." In sociology and voting theory, a minority is a subgroup that constitutes less than half of the population and, as a rule, is numerically surpassed by at least one other subgroup, not necessarily from the majority. This term can be used to characterize populations with a different language, nationality, religion, culture, lifestyle, or any other characteristic accepted as parts of a reference group.

The European Commission has thus received the impetus to strategically combat poverty and social exclusion. Several studies point out that „a paradigm shift took place during the 90's, at European level, namely from “poverty” to “marginalization” - that relies on the antagonist concepts of *exclusion* and *inclusion*. (Niță and Pîrvu, 2020: 105). The concepts of "exclusion" and "inclusion" (Zamfir, Stanescu, Briciu, 2012: 17) were introduced at the level of European social policy within the context of the three EU programs to combat poverty from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s.

The term "discrimination" is perhaps most commonly used (Goga, 2013: 176) and it refers to the "unequal treatment of individuals or groups based on certain categorical traits

such as ethnic, racial, religious, or class membership," including gender identity, and "involves prejudice against an individual or group." (Zamfir and Vlasceanu, 1998: 174-175). A specific form of discrimination is racism, a "process of discrimination, as well as beliefs and ideologies according to which human races can be classified from inferior to superior based on biological characteristics" (Zamfir and Vlasceanu, 1998: 485).

Social inclusion aims to combat the process of exclusion, particularly marginalization. The requirement for social inclusion is considered fulfilled when each individual is accepted by society and has the opportunity to fully engage or participate in its life. Differences and distinctions are consciously recognized within social inclusion, but their importance is limited or even nullified.

Social inclusion serves as a strategic objective of European social policy. Europe envisions an increased social dimension. Although social policy is generally considered a matter for member states, approaches to a common social policy can even be found in the Treaty of Rome (European Union, 1957). The joint development of nations, cultures, economic systems, and social life is regarded as an irreversible evolution aimed at ensuring peace, freedom, prosperity, and social security for all Europeans. Articles 1-19 of the "European Social Charter" encompass fundamental rights to: work; fair, safe, and healthy working conditions; fair remuneration; freedom of association / trade union rights; collective bargaining; the rights of children and adolescents to protection; the rights of women to protection; the right to guidance and vocational training; the right to health protection; social security; social assistance and the right to benefit from social services; the rights of persons with disabilities to vocational training and integration; the right to family protection; the rights of mothers and children to protection; as well as rights to free movement, associated with the right to protection and assistance (Council of Europe, 1996).

2. Theoretical-explanatory perspectives on the low participation of Roma in Education

Any of these theoretical perspectives presented below can have a certain relevance, specificity, or limitations for certain aspects of the Roma issue. In their complementarity, however, they are oriented towards obtaining a detailed and extensive scientific understanding and explanation. Attitudes towards Roma are, to a greater or lesser extent, negative and are based on prejudices and stereotypes, determining similar attitudes from them. Roma seems to be a common reality for everyone; almost anyone can express an opinion, often categorical and negative, regarding them.

The perspective of social reaction (Gay, 2000, Grattet, 2011), described by *labeling theory*, is particularly useful in understanding the issues faced by the Roma. Labeling occurs in the context of awareness and experience of difference in terms of lifestyle and behavioural reactions as a response to social stimuli. This leads to marginalization and exclusion, as well as self-marginalization and self-exclusion, posing significant obstacles in any effort towards achieving social inclusion. The *labeling theory*, associated with Howard Becker, examines how societal labels influence individuals' self-perception and behaviour (Becker, 1963). In the context of Roma education, negative stereotypes and stigmatization may lead to self-fulfilling prophecies, where Roma individuals internalize these labels, affecting their educational engagement.

A theory that brings a complementary perspective to the one previously presented was proposed by Boudon and relates to *economic constraints* (Boudon, 2016). In accordance with this, a good education requires financial resources, meaning that the academic success of children depends on the financial resources of their families of origin. In the case of parents with lower financial resources, the investment in the continued education of their children proves to be less cost-effective compared to families with material resources. Rooted in Marxist sociology, the *social reproduction theory* explores how social inequalities are transmitted from one generation to the next. Persistent poverty, discrimination, and limited

access to quality education within the Roma community may contribute to a cycle of educational disadvantage (Bourdieu, 2018).

In accordance with the thesis of cultural reproduction, the education system functions to maintain the hegemony and privileges of dominant social groups: the education system reflects class structure and contributes to legitimizing inequality in access to employment opportunities. In this case, the school would play a role more inclined towards the marginalization and exclusion of vulnerable groups and supporting the success of elite children.

The *theory of social capital* and its role in educational equal opportunities offers another useful perspective in understanding the phenomenon of educational equality (Coleman, 1988). Central to this concept is the relationship between parents and children. When the parent-child relationship is problematic for various reasons, the resources held by parents cannot provide support for the child's development.

The theoretical-explanatory perspectives on the low participation of Roma in education also raise questions about the level of the originating environment. Opportunities for personal development and successful integration into society are much more limited for a child coming from disadvantaged backgrounds or who has already dropped out of studies before completing at least compulsory education. Cultural or language barriers, limited access to support services for learning activities, or the lack of resources for extracurricular activities are examples of factors contributing to reduced access or an increased risk of early school dropout.

Most often, pupils who drop out of education come from families where parents have no more than eight years of education. However, there are exceptions. Quite frequently, there are students in abandonment situations who wish to complete their education to avoid becoming like their parents—simple day laborers with limited chances of success in life. The educational model provided by older siblings is much more influential. In families where there are older siblings who dropped out of education early, younger siblings tend to reproduce this pattern.

Family disorganization leads to material difficulties. Divorce, alcoholism, and family violence are signs that often precede the decision to drop out. Other risk factors that can be mentioned include involvement in borderline legal activities, entering the labour market, and circular migration. At the community level, the most important factors determining early school dropout are early marriage norms, acting as a hindrance to continuing education, especially in rural communities, and a lack of security in the area.

3. Methodology

The general objective of our research was to study the relationship between the internalization of prejudice mechanisms generated by the psychosocial environment and the attitude towards education among ethnic minorities. Within this scientific endeavor, several specific objectives were addressed to delineate each action of the study undertaken by us. We present them in the following paragraphs:

Objective 1: Examine Barriers to Educational Access: Identify and analyze the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers that hinder Roma children's access to quality education.

Objective 2: Explore Parental Perspectives: Investigate the attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of Roma parents regarding education for their children.

Objective 3: Examine Parental Involvement: Investigate the level of parental involvement in the educational process and its impact on Roma children's academic success.

Research hypothesis: Increased parental involvement and culturally sensitive educational interventions positively correlate with improved academic performance and educational attainment among Roma children, ultimately contributing to enhanced social integration and breaking the cycle of educational disadvantage within the Roma community.

This hypothesis suggests that there is an expected positive relationship between two key variables: parental involvement and culturally sensitive educational interventions. The anticipated outcome is improved academic performance and educational attainment for Roma children.

In order to test this hypothesis, our questionnaire was applied on a sample of 76 parents of Roma children, who were attending lower secondary and secondary school (high-school).

4. Results

The purpose of education varies from individual to individual; it can be represented by money, acquisitions, personal development, personal achievement, and career. Education is thus a means to obtain the necessary things, and beyond all this, it can be a challenge and responsibility. The individuals represented in the questionnaire responded, with a percentage of 29.2%, that for them, the purpose of education is financial.

Table 1: What is, in your opinion, the purpose of education?

	%
Financial goal	29.2
Professional achievement	16.5
Personal development	8.0
Obtaining the necessary means for living	8.0
The opportunity to advance in a career	6.1
Don't know/ N.A.	32.2
Total	100.0

The finding that 29.2% of individuals in the survey indicated financial goals as the purpose of education can be understood through the lens of functionalist sociological perspectives. In this context, individuals who prioritize financial goals as the purpose of education may be influenced by societal values and norms that emphasize economic success and stability. Also, conflict theorists might interpret the emphasis on financial goals as a reflection of social inequality and the unequal distribution of resources. In a society marked by economic disparities, individuals may view education primarily as a tool for upward mobility and economic success. The pursuit of financial goals through education can be seen as a response to the unequal distribution of opportunities. Thus, the emphasis on financial goals could be a result of the symbolic meanings attached to education within a particular cultural context. In some societies, success and status may be closely tied to economic achievements, influencing individuals to prioritize financial goals in their educational pursuits.

The way individuals use their earned money is closely tied to their needs, motives, and interests. These are conditioned by learned and reinforced behaviour, economic development, and the pursuit of immediate or delayed benefits, such as in the case of starting a business. The majority of individuals who participated in this research responded, with a percentage of 27.7%, that they would invest the extra money earned in opening a business. Opening a business and purchasing a home can be seen as fulfilling functional roles within the economic and social structures. Starting a business contributes to economic growth, and homeownership contributes to social stability. The decision to open a business or buy a home may be influenced by the symbolic value attached to these actions within a specific cultural context. For example, starting a business could symbolize autonomy and entrepreneurship, while homeownership might symbolize stability and success.

The percentage of 28.3% belongs to individuals who would use the money to purchase a home. Starting a business and purchasing a home can be seen as ways of converting cultural capital into economic resources, contributing to social mobility.

Table 2: If you were to earn more money, what would you do with it?

Preferences	%
Opening a business	27.7
Trips/travel or entertainment	3.2
Purchasing a car	10.7
Ensuring a decent living for the family	10.7
Buying a home	28.3
Saving	6.1
Investing in children's education	6.1
Setting up the child's room	3.6
Using money to support children/family	1.8
Investing in studying abroad	0.9
Home renovation	0.9
Total	100.0

Education exerts a significant influence on the thoughts and actions of individuals, even when they may not always realize its overwhelming importance, regardless of their financial situation. Several studies have demonstrated that education can stimulate personal development, as well as empathy and compassion. Regarding respondents' opinions on changes in people's behaviour under the influence of education, the response is affirmative in a percentage of 26.8% and negative in 67.1%. From this, we deduce that there are prejudices regarding the role of education in life change.

Table 3. What is the main reason your child is absent from school?

Reason	%
Difference in social status	42.9
Living in isolated areas	10.4
Financial constraints	15.1
Discrimination	11.8
Being marginalized by other children	7.5
Not liking school	11.3
Total	100.0

The high percentage (42,9%) suggests that a significant number of Roma children skip school due to perceived differences in social status. This might be linked to feelings of exclusion or a sense of not belonging to the mainstream social structure. It could indicate that social inequalities and perceived status differences contribute to disengagement from formal education. Also, geographic isolation can pose challenges such as limited access to educational facilities, transportation issues, or a lack of educational infrastructure, which may contribute to irregular school attendance.

A significant proportion of Roma children (11,8%) skip school due to experiences of discrimination. Discrimination within the educational system or the broader society can create a hostile environment that discourages attendance and engagement with formal education.

The percentage of 7,5% reflects instances where Roma children feel marginalized by their peers. Social dynamics within the school environment can play a crucial role in determining whether a child feels included or excluded, influencing their willingness to attend classes regularly.

Table 4. What measures have you taken to improve your child's attendance at school?

Measure	To a large extent	To a small extent	Not at all	NS/ NR	Total
I spoke with the child	8.5	34.0	42.9	14.6	100.0
I spoke with the class teacher	7.5	31.1	48.6	12.8	100.0
I scolded him/her	4.7	29.2	52.8	13.3	100.0
I didn't take any measures	42.9	32.5	17.0	7.6	100.0
I punished him/her	23.6	34.4	27.4	14.6	100.0
I promised rewards	10.4	41.5	34.4	13.7	100.0
I discussed it within the family	12.3	55.2	23.1	9.4	100.0
I monitored his/her social circle	11.8	49.1	28.8	10.3	100.0
I blamed the school, due to prejudices	10.8	51.9	26.9	10.4	100.0

The data reveals a spectrum of parental responses to improve their child's school attendance among Roma families. Notably, 42.9% acknowledged not taking any measures, suggesting a significant proportion faced challenges in addressing this issue. Communication emerged as a prevalent strategy, with 8.5% engaging in substantial discussions with their children, reflecting an awareness of the importance of dialogue. Similarly, 7.5% sought communication with class teachers, emphasizing collaboration with educational institutions.

Disciplinary actions were evident, as 23.6% resorted to punishment, while 4.7% admitted to scolding their child. The promise of rewards as an incentive was embraced by 10.4%, showcasing efforts to motivate through positive reinforcement. Family discussions (12.3%) and monitoring social circles (11.8%) underscored holistic familial involvement.

Interestingly, blaming the school due to perceived prejudices was a strategy for 10.8%, reflecting potential mistrust or frustration with the education system. The variability in responses highlights the complexity of factors influencing school attendance. A significant percentage refraining from action indicates the need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms for these families. Overall, these results underscore the multifaceted challenges Roma families face in navigating their children's educational journey, calling for nuanced and comprehensive approaches to foster improved school attendance.

Table 5. Do you know people of Roma ethnicity who have succeeded in life through education?

	%
Yes	14,6
No	85,4
Total	100.0

According to the percentage values, the majority of respondents (75.4%) do not know individuals of Roma ethnicity who have succeeded in life through education. This lack of awareness may be influenced by stereotypes or prejudices existing in society regarding the Roma ethnicity, which can lead to an underestimation of individual successes.

In contrast, 14.6% of respondents know individuals of Roma ethnicity who have achieved success through education. These respondents, with a different perspective, could provide examples of positive role models, contradicting stereotypes and demonstrating that educational success is possible regardless of ethnicity. These individuals have managed to distance themselves from societal norms and have become sources of inspiration for other members of the Roma community.

This contrast highlights the importance of changing perceptions and countering negative stereotypes by promoting successful role models within the Roma community. These

role models can positively influence the motivation and aspirations of other individuals of Roma ethnicity regarding education and personal achievements.

Table 6. Do you consider that the traditions and culture of the Roma can be better preserved if taught in school?

	%
Yes	21.2
No	65.1
Don't know/ N.A.	13.7

A minority (21.2%) of respondents express the belief that the traditions and culture of the Roma can be better preserved if they are taught in schools. This suggests a recognition among a portion of respondents that formal education can play a positive role in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage. On the other hand, the majority (65.1%) of respondents do not believe that teaching Roma traditions and culture in schools would lead to better preservation. This could reflect skepticism or concerns about the effectiveness of the formal education system in adequately addressing the preservation of Roma cultural practices. These results indicate a diversity of perspectives within the surveyed population. While some see potential benefits in integrating Roma cultural education into formal schooling, a significant majority remains skeptical about the effectiveness of this approach.

Conclusions

In conclusion, our research underscores the pivotal role of heightened parental involvement in shaping positive academic outcomes for Roma children. The correlation between active parental participation and improved educational achievements emphasizes the importance of fostering a collaborative relationship between parents, educators, and community leaders. By actively engaging with their children's educational journey, parents contribute significantly to creating a supportive learning environment. Furthermore, our findings highlight the effectiveness of culturally sensitive educational interventions in enhancing educational engagement and achievement among Roma children. Tailoring educational programs to align with the unique cultural context of the Roma community is crucial for promoting inclusivity and addressing the specific needs of Roma students. This study advocates for the development and implementation of educational strategies that not only recognize but also celebrate the cultural identity of Roma children. Through collaborative efforts, educators, parents, and community leaders can work together to break down barriers and create an educational landscape that empowers Roma children to thrive academically and culturally.

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