

THE ISSUE OF FAILURE OF ROMA STUDENTS AT SCHOOL

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Tóth, N. (2020). The Issue of Failure of Roma Students at School. *Különleges Bánásmód*, 6. (1). 95-102. DOI [10.18458/KB.2020.1.95](https://doi.org/10.18458/KB.2020.1.95)

Abstract

The phenomenon can be encountered day by day that at primary schools there are just few Roma children among well-performing students, while among students who fail in fulfilling the requirements there are a great amount of Roma pupils. The question may come to the surface intuitively: What are the reasons behind that? The paper aims to discover and explain this problem relying on the relevant literature.

Keywords: roma students, school failure

Disciplines: pedagogy

Absztrakt

CIGÁNY TANULÓK ISKOLAI SIKERTELENSÉGÉNEK PROBLEMATIKÁJA.

A tanulmány abból a feltevésből indul ki, miszerint a cigány származású tanulók iskolai teljesítménye kudarcokkal teli. Ezt figyelembe véve a jelen írás arra vállalkozik, hogy olyan okokra reflektáljon a cigány tanulók iskolai kudarcaival kapcsolatban, amelyek a szűkebb-tágabb közvélemény számára is ismertek, sőt bizonyos esetekben, némileg negatív konnotációval, közhelyekké váltak. Célunk, hogy e tényezőket a tudományos diskurzus szemszögéből vizsgáljuk meg.

Kulcsszavak: roma tanulók, iskolai sikertelenség

Diszciplína: pedagógia

Introduction

The study is based on the assumption that the school performance of Roma students is full of failure. With this in mind, this paper attempts to reflect on the causes of Roma students' school failures that are known to the larger or smaller public, and in some cases have become cliché with somewhat negative connotations.

The difficulties and problems with the school and the education system of Roma students have been examined for decades by experts in various fields of science, using the tool of sociology as a case study, other times they approach the problem from the perspective of cultural anthropologists (Forray and Hegedűs, 1999).

We have divergent knowledge about the specific causes of this failure, including the scientific work of Zita Réger, Anna Csongor, Ilona Liskó, Gábor Kertesi or Péter Radó. Therefore, the question may be rightly raised as to whether the above-mentioned problem being repeatedly investigated is justified.

In my opinion, it makes sense to occasionally focus on issues related to Gypsies in scientific research, because each point of view presents the discourse from a different light. This is especially true when it comes to educating Roma students. The related explanations, are generally very partial, in a sense incomplete, and contextual. This has the consequence that only certain aspects of reality are examined.

Re-visiting the problem has relevance in many other respects. It is true that the problem of the education of students of Roma origin requires a different interpretation in the context of radically changed social circumstances (Kemény, 1996). For example, in recent years, the legal, content regulation and financing of public education has undergone major changes and amendments. Another important factor is that the minority legal system has been formed and minority self-governments have been established (Cserti Csapó, 2004).

The relevance mentioned above is also confirmed by the increasing number of educational policy initiatives that are truly a reality and can actually be evaluated in accordance with each educational experiment.

Theoretical frameworks

Before elaborating on the reasons for the failure of Roma students at school, I briefly summarize the prevailing views in the literature on this issue. In recent decades, studies on the teaching of Roma education have identified two decisive approaches to the causes of the failure of Roma students.

- According to one, the failure is mainly due to the poor school maturity of Roma students, or the inadequacy of family socialization. This explanation can be found in the studies of Peter Farkas and János Jakab (Farkas and Jakab, 1995) or in the reports of Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi (Kertesi and Kézdi, 1996).
- In contrast, Zita Réger, Péter Radó, Ilona Liskó and Katalin Oppelt attribute the same or greater role to the school than they are not prepared for the education of Roma students. (Oppelt, 1996)

In the conceptual system of Péter Farkas and János Jakab, Gypsies can be defined as a social marginal group. In their opinion: „The reasons that determine the school failure rate of the entire population accumulate in Roma families. (Poverty, unemployment, irregular lifestyle, rejection of school norms.)” (Farkas and Jakab, 1996, p. 57) According to Kertesi and Kézdi „the reasons for the failure of Roma students to reach schools are not the disadvantages of the settlement and the lower quality indicators of their schools, but for the shortcomings of their family socialization and school maturity before school”. (Kertesi and Kézdi 1996, p. 27)

The same theory can also be observed in international literature. James Samuel Coleman, for example, points out that the socio-economic status of parents in particular has a decisive impact on children's performance at school, but no significant impact on school performance can be detected (Coleman, 1966). In any event, Coleman's views must be criticized in the light of the Hungarian context, especially if we consider the socially highly selective nature of the Hungarian school system.

Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi came to the above conclusions during a mathematical analysis of school statistics published by the then Ministry of Education and Culture.

Their main aim was to develop a variable that describes the quality of the school by combining different statistical variables. They were of the opinion that the variable created would explain the failure of Roma students at school to a much lesser extent than other researchers had predicted. The 'school quality' variable contained the following content elements: ratio of classes with more than 30 pupils, ratio of classes combined, ratio of specialized teacher hours, ratio of emergency classrooms, and ratio of unqualified teachers. (Kertesi and Kézdi, 1996)

Kertesi and Kézdi's theory was not unanimously accepted by the scientific public. Eszter Harsányi and Péter Radó, for example, were of the opinion that the authors had made misleading statements. There are two specific reasons for their criticism. (Harsányi and Radó, 1997) One of the critical elements is primarily methodological and relates to the limitations of the sociological usability of school statistics. In this respect, it is firstly stated that the "quality of the school" variable is not valid in several respects.

They emphasize that the procedure used by Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi is a statistically good approach to determine the efficiency and quality of the school, but strictly only when it comes to educating non-Roma students, the pro-

gram will be supplemented with an evaluation of the pedagogical methods used and the measurement of the students' level of knowledge.

According to Harsányi and Radó, because of the complexity of the problem, many other aspects need to be taken into account by researchers in connection with the education Roma students. An important factor is the teachers' special skills (for example, in romology), the degree of segregation, the linguistic background of Roma pupils, and the degree of prejudice towards Roma pupils within the school is also a significant factor.

The factors listed above cannot be obtained from school statistics. According to Harsányi and Radó, however, it is these aspects that are most capable of explaining failures at school (Harsányi and Radó, 1997).

The other critical element is due to a difference in approach. This is mainly due to that Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi's studies can be interpreted as, students from other ethnic backgrounds must unconditionally adapt to the expectations and requirements of the school, while going through acculturation. In this regard, Eszter Harsányi and Péter Radó point out that the school's task is to ensure the successful educational progress of students of Roma origin without assimilation expectations.

Theoretical aspects of the causes of failure at school

The fact that the failure of Roma pupils at school cannot be traced back to one specific problem requires no particular scientific explanation. The various problems are causally related in a way of a cause and effect relationship (Liskó, 1996). However, Spanish-born romologist José Eugenio Abajo Alcalde points out that there are some theories that try to explain the failure of Roma children to school by a specific factor.

The starting point for these theories is that they represent a one-dimensional, deterministic point of

view. They believe that, for Roma children, school failure can be assumed because they have a socio-economic status that prevents their social mobility.

In the following, I present the univariate interpretation models collected by José Eugenio (José Eugenio, 2008). The basic concept of the first such model is blaming ethnicity and family. The essence of this is that it sets the Roma ethnicity, the main characteristic of which is that the children of the families fall behind in their school studies compared to non-Roma students. Roma parents make no effort to solve their school failure, but rather stop their children from attending school. So it can be seen that this concept defines the failure of students of Roma origin as a family problem, a problem that is specific to Gypsies, since theory assumes that all people of Roma descent, simply because they are Roma, are characterized by "something," which makes it harder to reach school than their acquaintances of other ethnicities.

The second model is psychologizing behaviour. This view no longer views family failures of Roma pupils as a family problem, but as an individual problem. The concept is primarily to blame and hold Roma children accountable for their underachievement in school. This is rooted in the fact that the school problems of children of this ethnic group are in fact a consequence of their inherent characteristics.

José Eugenio considers the following elements to be most important in relation to psychologizing behaviour:

- „They are deemed to have a low intellectual level, less motivation or less developed skills, or they may be very different, for example: They only have practical intelligence.” (José, 2008, p.33)
- „They are considered to be malicious, non-adaptive, aggressive, unbalanced or prone to criminal activities” (José, 2008, p.33)

The third model is sociological determinism. The essence of this theory is based on that the main role of the educational system, including the school, is to reproduce and legitimize the hierarchical social system (José, 2008). Thus, the sociological determinism model assumes that students' school performance is highly dependent on the social class and family in which the individual is born. By way of example, for a child from a higher social class, primary socialization already creates the direct or indirect conditions that significantly facilitate later prosperity. In contrast, children whose family circumstances are unsatisfactory and their environment is not able to function as an intellectual environment for them are almost doomed to school failure. This phenomenon is clearly detectable among the Roma ethnic group. In this connection, José Eugenio lists a number of factors that greatly influence students' school performance, depending on the social group they belong to. These elements are: housing, nutrition, financial conditions, hygiene and health conditions, books, newspapers, language used in their social environment, parents' education, private lessons and travel, or parents' expectations of their children's studies.

Sociological determinism is similar to the model of psychologizing behaviour in that both approaches are based on that children from certain ethnic minorities are doomed to failure because of their origin. However, sociological determinism also emphasizes that educational reforms cannot solve the situation because they do not begin to work out possible alternatives at the root of the problem.

The fourth model can be defined as intercultural conflict, which basically approaches the problem from an essentialist point of view. The main idea of this is to solve or even consolidate the failure of Roma students in segregation (José, 2008.) The concept is primarily due to the fact that there is such a gap between the Roma ethnicity and the culture of the majority society that it is almost impos-

sible to bridge in the foreseeable future. The different cultural milieu, of course, induces the Roma students to be educated and educated according to different principles, which the co-educated school cannot provide. However, the intercultural model of conflict also formulates other sanctimonies, which often provoke sharp discourse in scientific discourse. Such an approach, for example, is that the school was not designed for the Gypsies, as it is difficult to fit into their specific culture, and thus forcing it violently is a meaningless task.

Furthermore, the culture of the Roma ethnic is "oriental and spiritualist" and as such difficult to reconcile with the "rationalizing materialism in capitalist society and schools" (José, 2008). At the same time, the idea is emerging that if Gypsies build an even closer relationship with the majority society, they risk losing their existence as an independent nation. In effect, this means that integration, so much mentioned, in which many see the key to the advancement of Gypsies, is a counter-productive process, because integration efforts endanger the identity and culture of the Gypsies.

The nature of failure at school

In the previous chapter, following the Spanish researcher José Eugenio, I tried to look at the theoretical problem of Roma school failure at school from a theoretical point of view, with some philosophical boundaries. In the following, we present the most practical factors that appear most prominently in scientific discourses.

Early socialization

A lot of theories look at the failure of Roma children at school because of inadequate family socialization. There is a cultural and mental discrepancy between Roma ethnicity and majority society, the consequences of which are manifested in different educational principles (Radó, 1995). The problem with this begins with the school being unable to

cope with the disadvantages that result from it. In this connection, Katalin Oppelt takes the view that early family socialization raises two fundamental problems for the school. One is the difference in personality development and the other is the difficulty of having low learning motivation. Against this background, he sees the main factors of early family socialization as: (Oppelt, 1996)

a) The lives of Roma families are unstructured. This has the consequence that the time experience and the concept of time are not, or only to a very limited extent, formed in these families. In practical terms, this means that their daily activities are not time-limited, and this kind of flexible time management is difficult to reconcile with the traditional time constraints of the school. I would also like to emphasize this because my own research confirms that in many cases the absences of Roma students at school can be attributed to time constraints (Tóth, 2018).

b) The next essential element of early family socialization is that one of the fundamental principles of Roma parents' education is to strive unconditionally to fulfil the wishes of their children. According to Katalin Forray, this has the consequence that in children, the ability to delay and self-control is not, or only very slightly, developed (Forray and Hegedűs, 1999). But without these skills, successful school performance is very difficult.

c) The third important factor is that one of the characteristics of children of Roma origin is that they already function as a "reduced adult" at the age of 13-14. Adolescence is eliminated in their lives.

Although this paper does not attempt to address psychological issues, I consider it necessary to mention that the low learning motivation of Roma children is not independent of the three factors listed above. And the situation is further complicated by considering the message of the family that the knowledge that can be acquired at school does not play a major role in survival strategies.

The language disadvantage

The first real test of the above-mentioned problems, especially those stemming from family socialization, is to decide in kindergarten whether or not children can begin primary school. One of the main criteria of school maturity is that the child's socialization on their mother tongue is at a level that ensures trouble-free and active participation in school work. They shall interpret the teacher's explanation and instructions seamlessly, ask questions, and collaborate with others (Radó, 1992).

The disadvantages of students of Roma origin can already be detected here without actually entering the education system. The disadvantage of language at school is mainly due to differences in the use of language at home and at school. In addition, the social and economic status of the family is closely linked to the development of the child's linguistic competence.

In lower-status families, abstract, more abstract thinking and its revelation and communication appear to some extent. Klein puts it in this relation as follows: „The less people talk or think in words about what they are experiencing, the less likely they are to be influenced by something that is not currently being given to their experience, the less likely it is that their actions are influenced by vague, general or abstract factors.” (Huszár, 2015, p. 282.).

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that education policy is not really aware of the problem, even though it would be a key factor to get Roma students into an educational language (Réger, 1995). From this point of view, it is a great responsibility for the kindergarten, but as few Roma children are regularly brought to kindergarten. In my opinion it is important to address the problem in the first two years of primary school in a purposeful manner, based on pre-defined pedagogical principles, even within the framework of an extra class / activity.

One of the milestones in the 1960s was the work of Basil Bernstein on school language disad-

vantages (Huszár, 2015). The curiosity of Bernstein's approach to the problem lies in the fact that it is not basically assumed that children starting school have certain language skills, which will affect their school performance. Rather, it focused on saying that families in the lower tier of the social ladder use language versions that greatly hinder the success of their children at school. The British sociologist called the aforementioned language version "restricted code". The terminology opposite is the "elaborated code", which means the language version used in the school.

Bernstein links the latter use of language to subculture: „A limited code is formed where the form of social relation is based on identification with one another, common expectations, a series of identical assumptions, where culture or subculture elevates what I have.” (Huszár, 2015, p. 283) And he links the "elaborate code" to high culture: „Wherever a culture or subculture emphasizes the self, in contrast to where the intent of the other person is not taken for granted, there is an elaborate code.” (Huszár, 2015, p. 283)

In conclusion, there has been no effective experimentation at the level of education policy to solve the problems caused by language problems at school. The only possible alternative was seen in segregation, that is, the Roma classes being launched. However, research by Zita Réger has repeatedly shown that the solution to language disadvantages is integrated education, not segregated education (Réger, 1995).

Segregation in school

Eszter Harsányi and Péter Radó distinguish between two main causes of school segregation. One can be explained by the fact that there is a kind of prejudice towards the Roma in the majority society. As a result, when a student of several Gypsies flows into a particular school, the parents of non-

Roma students take their children to another school (Harsányi and Radó, 1997).

The second factor is related to the migration of highly qualified people of non-Roma origin to regions with better living conditions, thus creating territorial islands within the country where Roma are over-represented. It is natural for schools in these areas to have a large number of students of Roma origin. In fact, segregated education becomes an automated process.

Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi, however, do not deal primarily with the causes of segregation but with their consequences. Their examination has a double perspective. On the one hand, attention is drawn to the impact of segregation on intergroup relations and, on the other hand, to what extent it plays a role in school performance (Kertesi and Kézdi, 2009).

In relation to segregation and intergroup relations, they emphasize that less contact is possible between students from different social groups. In the integrated context, individual students come from families with different social status. This has the positive effect that students of lower social status, including those of Roma origin, have the opportunity to make school friendships with their peers from a higher social class. In the future, this may be reduced to social capital.

Segregated education does not allow this network to be built. This can have several serious consequences. Kertesi and Kézdi list these factors on the basis of international literature (Kertesi and Kézdi, 2009). They primarily reflect on Allport's determination. The point is that people who do not meet people from other cultures in childhood will have a problem with living with other ethnicities in adulthood. They will be distrustful and prejudiced, and their thinking will be based on stereotypes.

According to Loury, the segregation of certain social groups implies that the political nation becomes fragmented. People do not experience, as a common experience, being citizens of a common

nation. Of course, it must also be emphasized that eliminating school segregation does not necessarily mean that all problems in intergroup relations can be overcome.

Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kézdi also approach segregation from the aspect of school performance. According to them: „School segregation typically and systematically involves low-quality education. This is an even more serious social problem, as a multitude of research studies prove that high-quality education can best promote the performance of the most disadvantaged students” (Kertesi and Kézdi, 2009, p. 962).

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that segregated education of children with low social status also means that elements of the education system that require selection based on ability are also present. This is also a problem because, when a school system is characterized by strong selectivity, segregation in connection with ability becomes a key factor.

Summary

My study also shows that Roma pupils cannot really be taught through traditional pedagogical methods, as the causes of their under-achievement in school are extremely diverse and complex. In this field, education policy would have a lot to do, especially given that there are hardly any institutions within public education where intensive pedagogical-methodological experiments are focused on the education of Roma students. The problem is made more difficult by how sensitive the topic is that teachers are not culturally neutral. This means that the socio-cultural background of the teacher is very much influenced by the expectations of the teachers towards the students.

In many cases, the problem begins with the failure of communication between the teacher and the learner, since the "elaborate code" used by the educators is difficult to reconcile with the "limited

code" of students with lower social status. In these cases, communication between teachers and parents is usually a problem. Recognizing this would also be important because one of the prerequisites for the success of pupils at school is effective co-operation between the family and the school.

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