THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF THE ROMA IN THE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Despite the fact that human rights are universal, they are frequently broken to the disadvantage of certain groups. These are often marginal groups or communities inside a country. The manner in which marginal groups are treated and the way they interact with the rest of the population differs from one country to another. Generally speaking, the policies regarding minorities range from integration to segregation and from assimilation to granted rights. Assimilation is that policy a minority is facing according to which the minority is forced to embrace the culture of the majority. This is accomplished by means of coercive measures which try to 'civilize' the minority and to force the members of the marginal groups to obey well established cultural standards. The Roma have often been the target of this type of assimilation policies in many European countries especially during the communist regimes. Integration is often considered a superior alternative to assimilation. Integration policies result in "the insertion with full rights of the individual in society" while respecting at the same time individual as well as cultural rights. This article intends to emphasise the need to integrate the Roma children in the Romanian educational system thus proving that in an open society, the tolerance towards cultural diversity, the social skills accumulated during school years and the amount of expectations-obligations at relationship levels are supposed to have a positive impact on the personal development of the Roma children.

Keywords: social integration, marginalization, ethnic identity, minority, racial discrimination, education.

1. Introduction

The education of Roma children is one of the challenges which social, economic and civic environments in Romania are facing. This is part of a larger set of problems which involve the education of children excluded or marginalized for different reasons. All these needs differentiated approaches depending on various specific parameters: residence environment, the sense of belonging to a marginal, ethnic group, belonging to a social group with a minimal economic status.

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Marginalization represents the process of placing the individuals or the groups at a peripheral social status or of isolation and it implies limiting their access to economic, political, educational, communicative resources of the community. From this perspective, marginalization means placing individuals and groups below the minimal level accepted from the economic, residential occupational and educational point of view, and it also materializes in a lack of possibilities of self-assertion and participation in the life of the community. (Zamfir and Vlăsceanu, 1993)

Marginal groups usually consist of the poor, the unemployed, ethnic minorities which are strongly discriminated against, delinquents, people unable to adapt, or people with disabilities. (Zamfir and Vlăsceanu, 1993)

2. Context

The absurd equalizing or better said standardizing policy of the individual promoted by the communist regimes in Eastern Europe had resulted in hesitations in accepting their social identity. The conclusion to be drawn is that before 1989 due to a policy which had as a purpose the diminishing of social differences and the "recruiting" of the whole population in a system there were no obvious marginalization processes of the Roma at the level of public institutions even though prejudices, stereotypy and discriminatory attitudes still existed among the non-Roma population.

However after 1989 the quick and intense social changes gave rise to serious and unpredictable problems during the process of institutionalization and democratic consolidation in society. (Rakadjiiska, 1996, p. 217).

Moreover the transition to a market economy also generated a process of social polarization and of marginalization.

The causes which triggered and maintained this process of marginalization consist, in their turn, of many factors that we are going to try to present as factors leading to marginalization in this particular case of the Roma children.

1.1. Social Factors

Alongside with the democratic changes which occurred, after 1989 the liberalization of the social relations also took place. As a consequence of this liberalization the equalizing - coercive forces disappeared, the social domain allowing the manifestation of group identities as well as that of prejudices, stereotype or discrimination which had been latent.

On the other hand within minorities there were groups with deviant or even delinquent behavior, which beside the social danger they represented had an extremely negative impact on the way the majority regarded them and they maintained a discriminatory even racist behavior.

This type of manifestations generate and maintain a tense, latently conflictual atmosphere between minority and majority each in its turn feeling threatened.

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Members of the Roma community, regardless of the country they live in, have several things in common, i.e. their marginal social status and lack of various rights and even perspectives. In the past, the members of the Roma community were not recognised as such and did not enjoy equality of rights. Nationalism, which is currently on the rise, also casts a shadow on their place in society. (Nicu, 2014)

1.2. Economic Factors

The changes in the economic life, the inflation, unemployment, the excessive differentiation of income, as well as the decrease of the standard of living, the shortage of dwelling places, all made an important contribution to the appearance and growth of the marginalization phenomenon and gave birth to a category of economically marginalized people.

From the point of view of social costs, one of the most vulnerable categories during transition was the Roma minority**,** because it had already been on high risks position: being poorly qualified they were seriously affected by unemployment, those who earned their living based on complementary economy became jobless and the activity of collecting and rendering profitable reusable materials dropped dramatically during that period.

On the other hand, the decrease in income and of the state allowance for children led to the dramatic decrease of the living standard for most of the Roma population and this crises was also aggravated by the pro-natality policy of the previous regime as it triggered other extremely serious consequences: lack of hygiene inside the dwellings, difficulties in keeping a satisfactory personal hygiene, risks regarding intimacy, promiscuity as well as difficulties regarding the education of the Roma children and teenagers and the way they socialize. (Zamfir and Vlasceanu, 1993)

In fact because of the low standard of living many Roma families gave up sending their children to school after 1989. The conditioning of state allowance by school attendance had a significantly positive influence on the school attendance of these children. Unfortunately, we cannot say that as a result of this decision the quality of the educational act improved.

1.3. Political and ethnic factors

In the period which followed December 1989 the Roma did not represent an ethnic community which was discriminated because they were not given the right to represent an ethnic community free to promote their own cultural traditions. The policy at that time was for them to be assimilated.

Alongside with the liberalization and democratization of the society a process of emancipation of the different ethnic, religious minorities occurred. Although they began shaping their identity they were also marginalized by the majority.

We need to notice the fact that this reaction is an universal one and is not

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characteristic to Romania, all over the world the ”rejected” belong to those categories which can no longer be assimilated by the dominant norms.

The democratization of the political life and the rise of many parties offered presented the ethnic minorities with the opportunity of being represented politically. Group identity (ethnic) was not well shaped at the beginning of the ‘90s and as a result, in order to enhance legitimacy, the political leaders led a campaign of exacerbation the identity of the minority to the disadvantage of what citizenship meant.

In order to redefine ethnic group identity the political leaders offered the identity of Roma as an alternative to that of *“gypsy*” seen as having a negative meaning and therefore stigmatized by the majority. The result was a gap existent even within the ethnic group between *Roma* (representing the political, intellectual and economic elite) and *gypsies (*representing the masses, those who felt ignored, manipulated or betrayed by the political leaders).

In the context of a reordered Europe where they were considered “common inheritance”, the Roma have become something for the European institutions to reflect on, a criteria of adhesion for Eastern European countries.

Most Southern and Eastern European governments have already joined a number of international treaties on the protection of minorities. These treaties are yet to be fully implemented but they exist nonetheless in written form and can be used anytime. In the meantime, however, the greatest dilemma seems to be the lack of measures against rising social exclusion and the fact that relevant educational and work inclusion policies are adopted and implemented only shyly and after much hesitation. (Nicu, 2014)

The only acceptable and viable alternative to the problem of marginalization would be on the one hand a coherent policy to prevent it and integration on the other hand, although integration is a term currently rejected by most of the Roma leaders.

The cause is the faulty understanding of the idea of integration which is fragmentarily perceived and is only seen as assimilation. In reality, integration means a relationship, a dynamic interaction between the system which is integrated and the one which integrates, the outcome being a functional balance of the parties involved.

2. Analysis of possible solutions

In Romania, as a unitary and indivisible state, if a Romanian citizen of any ethnic group has a problem of social integration, the public authorities have a legal obligation to identify the causes of the problem and find the solution to solve it. Civil society and the citizen in question have a moral obligation to work with public authorities to resolve the issue. (Nicu, 2014, p. 23)

However we have to keep in mind that social integration has four fundamental dimensions, that is: first of all cultural then normative, communicational and functional integration. If cultural integration means the

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coherence of the norms and values of a culture, normative integration represents the proportion in which group values become, in fact, norms. However this requirement on the behalf of the majority to comply with its norms, is often understood as a tendency of assimilation.

In Romania there is a significant percent of Roma which are considered integrated at present, at least at the functional and normative level. The members of the intellectual and economic elite are the best integrated. Also, those having a medium level of education or modern jobs are well enough integrated from the social point of view. The factors which can and must decide the improvement of the functional integration process of the Roma in the "intercultural society" are: the educational system, media, social assistance and the people in charge on behalf of the government. They all have the duty to elaborate a coherent policy regarding all ethnic minorities in Romania, a policy which takes into account respecting the rights of all minorities as well as eliminating and anticipating discriminatory and racist behaviors.

However, in general Roma families have many children, the unemployment rate is higher, they do unskilled labour and the living standard is below average. The Roma are facing segregation in schools, discrimination in society and a high risk of poverty.

Precisely because of these the government and the civil society have taken many initiatives which deal with the problem of the social exclusion of the Roma.

The Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, in partnership with other international organizations (UNICEF, Roma Criss, Phoenix Foundation and other non-governmental organizations) has elaborated and implemented a series of projects which focus on stimulating the Roma children to take part in classes and at the same time avoid their abandoning school and help their social integration.

In order to rise their level of integration and education, the project Equal Chances was founded. This project was meant to improve the extremely difficult situation of the Roma children from Romania by implementing a school development model, by making the institutional changes easier and by involving the Roma parents and children in school life. The strategy adopted by the promoters of the programme focuses on the idea of producing institutional changes and encouraging actions which will allow a better adaptation of these children to school life this playing a crucial part in increasing their later success.

Therefore, the access of Roma children to high quality education represents a complex problem which needs to be approached comprehensively. Its complexity comes from the diversity of the educational contexts in which it takes place at present as well as from the influence of some environmental, social, economic factors with a direct or mediated impact on formal education.

The paradigms which are likely to approach the problem of the equal access to a quality education successfully would be:

- Education as a form of investing in the social capital;

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- Education as a form of investing in human capital;
- Education as a form of imitating the inequalities existent within the social system;
- Education as a means of conveying values.

Regardless the paradigms the existence of schools with a large number of Roma students has *high opportunity costs* both for the families of these children and for the society in its whole. In other words, the "choice" of this type of school means low level of social and human capital for the Roma as well as an inferior social position within the existent social stratification. Assuming that these children study in Romanian schools, which are ethnocentric from the point of view of the curriculum and from that of the ideologies of the teachers involved, the values acquired during school are likely to contribute to a low self esteem of the Roma children (Cherata, 2005).

The existence of the schools with numerous Roma children questions the progress in terms of social and human capital, social status which the Roma can gain from by educating themselves within the formal education system in Romania. The existence of the classes which are formed exclusively of Roma children also questions the benefits of formal education. Cultural diversity represents the premise of accumulating a high quality social capital which is at the same time functional in Romanian society. Not letting these children have diverse social and ethnic relationships within the school/ classroom would mean depriving them of future social opportunities such as finding a job by means of informal relations. More generally speaking it would mean not allowing them to obtain a positive feedback concerning plans/ projects meant to be successful in Romanian society (Popescu & Ștefan, 2014).

School represents a social space where we accumulate social capital.

In the conditions offered by an open society tolerance towards cultural diversity, the social capital accumulated during school years, the amount of expectations-obligations at the relationship level are supposed to have a positive impact on the personal development of the Roma children. The human capital acquired by means of the formal education and having the advantage of cultural diversity is probably a justified one which triggers the possibility of vertical movement within the social structure.

No matter what paradigm the analysis of the problem of the access to a quality education is placed in, the variable "confidence in education" is a central one. If we lack confidence in formal education, the educational system becomes unable to function and education within the family becomes an alternative for some of the Roma parents, especially traditional Roma families, estimated at approximately at 3%-10% of the entire Roma population in Romania (Cherata, 2005).

The low level of the educational process in schools with a high number of Roma children is also the result of the migration of both teachers and students

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within the Romanian educational system. In both cases the tendency to migrate, is from the direction of those schools poorly endowed both material and human resources towards better endowed schools. In the rural area, the destination of migration is represented by "central" schools considered as able to offer better opportunities of development for children. Isolated schools from the outskirts become in this situation deprived of human and material resources. Not only Romanian students and teachers are affected by this migration but also some of the Roma children who come from wealthier families. The causes of school migration of both students and teachers within the system are determined by the degree of trust invested in a school. We may assume that the higher the percentage of Roma children is in a school, the more probable it is for the confidence in that school to be low.

Another fact to be mentioned is that of the buildings where Roma children study. These buildings are older and more crowded, then, others and in most cases they do not have toilets inside the building and a library is out of question. Such schools have less qualified teachers, many of them are transferred especially teachers with grades between 1and 4 at the exams; 67% of "Roma" schools had a shortage of qualified teachers, and, at schools having more than 50% Roma children, the shortage was of more than 80% (Crai, 2012; Strechie, 2013; Bușu & Luchici, 2016).

Moreover, there are a series of social, economic, cultural problems which have serious consequences such as avoiding entering school, missing classes or the fact that these children abandon school. Other causes connected to the child include: poor health, problems with their psycho-intellectual development, their lack of motivation regarding the learning process, sexual differences, (according to which girls can get married early and their social role is that of bringing up children and of having a family), a low self-esteem and low grades at school. From what teachers say, two thirds of the Roma children which have abandoned education show lack of interest in school, over 20% develop rejection attitudes and only 10% have a positive attitude towards school.

A study ("Roma in search for self esteem") carried out in 90 schools from Bucharest and other nine counties showed that in 67% of these institutions, Roma children were segregated. A similar study from 2007 revealed that, in Roma communities from Romania 23% of those questioned had no education, and only 27% had graduated primary school. Only 20 % of the Roma children attend pre-school classes compared to 52% children belonging to the families of the majority and other ethnic groups (Crai, 2012).

Some are hasty and blame the parents. Sociological studies show that the school results of a child are directly influenced by his/her mother's education. Taking into consideration the reduced number of Roma girls who attend school and who reach a high educational level, the perspectives are extremely pessimistic.

Although it is easier to blame the parents "the lack of culture" generated

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by poverty it would be advisable to look into things more closely (Crai, 2012; Ciuperca & Ciuperca, 2015; Călin, 2015; Motoi & Dumitru, 2016).

Anyone who has dealt with the bureaucratic procedure regarding the child's entrance in a school knows what we mean. To enter a child in a school the employees ask for more documents than those stipulated in the law. For example, they often ask for a birth certificate although the law does not require it. In addition to this some ask for medical exams, which is a real problem for a community where most of its members have never heard of a family doctor.

3. Conclusion

The problems that Roma children are dealing with are numerous and complex and there are no quick solutions. All studies focusing on the conditions in which Roma children live show them as being below standard and at the same time jeopardizing their health. The health of these children forces many of them to abandon school, even not go to school at all. Extreme poverty also affects the rate of coverage and school attendance. A numerous family which leaves in poverty, as it is the case with many Roma families from our country, difficultly manages to cover the costs of education. Clothing, books, footwear and so on are often too expensive for these families representing for them more of a luxury then a necessity. In the families with no income, the adults sometimes try to overcome the situation by sending their children to work at an early age. Older children often have to take care of their younger brothers. These are only a few problems of health and protection which keep these children away from school.

The dramatic impact of the stigma attached to the Roma communities affects the Roma children dramatically (Bălan, 2006; Sandu, 2009; Ignat, Stoian & Roșca, 2014). This stigma makes the Roma children turn away from the outside world and ruins their expectations. Even teachers have little expectations in what concerns them because of the negative stereotype existing in society. This fact has a powerful secondary impact regarding these children's own school expectations (Teodorescu, 2015; Deniz & Hamarta, 2016).

The damage made by the social injustice called discrimination has deeply scared the Roma children. All of us without exception have the duty to change things.

Years ago, many efforts were made by the public institutions to improve the situation of the Roma children. Moreover, many positive initiatives were taken to promote their rights and those of all other categories of children which were considered vulnerable (Grant, 2009; Rosca, 2015; Enachescu & Tarabay, 2016). However, for various reasons the results did not show up as quickly as we had expected.

UNICEF together with the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research and a group of non-governmental organizations, both Roma and non-Roma have started a few programmes in order to help Roma children to go to school because by means of a quality education they can surpass exclusion (the first step was the access to early educational programmes and parental education.)

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In order to make progress three steps are important:

a) to give priority to the implementation of the polices adopted by the competent Romanian authorities

b) to extrapolate the best methods taking into account the particular features and the diversity of the Roma communities (there is no single approach able to fit any situation, but in similar conditions similar measures can be taken) and

c) to monitor the situation of the Roma children and the progress made by the measures taken.

The genuine involvement of the authorities and the support given to Roma families in order to ensure them a decent life, work places, solving the uncertain situations concerning their identity papers as well as counseling them could all contribute to the improvement of their situation and to that of their children.

A constant and coherent social policy at the local and national level represents the only solution to improve the situation of the Roma by offering their children a better future and the opportunity to enjoy their rights.

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