

**QUALITY OF EDUCATION
IN SCHOOLS WITH A HIGH PERCENTAGE OF ROMA PUPILS
IN ROMANIA¹**

Summary

The main aim of this paper is to demonstrate that **in segregated schools, with a high percentage of Roma pupils, the quality of education is lower compared with the entire educational system.** In other words, considering the point of view of education quality, schools with a majority of Roma pupils are “second hand” schools. In the first part of the paper we define the mean of segregation used in this study. Next we briefly highlight main causes conducting, in our opinion, to segregation. In the following parts we evaluate quality of education in schools with a high percentage of Roma pupils, by three approaches: school achievement evaluation, school facilities and teachers qualification evaluation and beneficiaries assessment of education quality. In the last part of the paper we briefly describe main policy options and make recommendations.

1. Defining segregation

De facto segregation is a physical separation of minority from the majority without legal constraints in overtaking this situation. In our view ***de facto* segregation (Romanian case) is an expression of traditions, prejudice and inertia than a policy intended to segregate.** Romanian Constitution and Education Law specify equal access to education for any person whatever race, ethnic origin, social status, gender, etc. a person may have. In addition to that, recent regulations of Ministry of Education and Research (hereinafter MER) allow to a pupil to enroll and transfer to any school from the system if he/she obtain an agreement from two schools, no matter the residence.

¹ Supported by the Open Society Institute - with the contribution of the International Policy Fellowship of OSI Budapest

In Romania, although the schools in which learn only Roma pupils or a high percent of Roma do exist (justifying use of segregation term), curricula in these schools is the same as for entire educational system (also in the communist regime). For this reason, segregation has not a similar meaning with segregation in other countries from region. The term of segregation does not refer here at special schools or curricula differences.

Schools with a high percentage of Roma are an undeniable reality although these schools are not a result of a local or central policy. These schools are usually situated near to Roma communities. Most of these communities have a high level of poverty. Roma schools are not only segregated school but also poor schools. Although formally are no barriers in enrolling or transferring pupils to other schools, practically Roma parents can encounter a series of economic, bureaucratic or mentalities barriers. In some cases Roma parents themselves are reluctant in enrolling their children to schools with a majority of pupils from other ethnic origin. If segregation is not a result of a governmental policy to maintain *status quo* can be considered a policy option.

2. “Roma schools” - physical or social distance?

In our opinion using *Roma* or *Gypsy school* to give a name to schools in which Roma pupils prevail is a mistake generating confusion. However the label Roma / Gypsy school is frequently used in common language. It is a mistake because in so-called Roma schools the teaching language is not Romani but the majority language (Romanian or Magyar). Romani language was only recently introduced in curricula, but as an optional object of study not as a teaching language. Moreover, the content of curricula has Romani culture as object of study only in few cases of schools with a high percentage of Roma pupils.

Schools with a majority of Roma children are in most of the cases a consequence of social history of Roma. In Romania, Roma were slaves since their arrival on this territory. Abolition was a process during almost 25 years, slavery being abolished only in the second half of the XIX century. Fixing Roma population on the land was a permanently concern of authorities in the slavery period and after, during also in the

communist period (Achim V., 1998). The process of fixing Roma on the land had as result isolated and homogenous Roma communities. These communities are usually situated on the margins of villages or outlying districts of cities. The communist regime tried by its town-planning policy to demolish Roma districts and to spread Roma population among majority population by moving Roma from houses to block of flats. This town-planning policy was largely unsuccessful, many Roma living today in Roma districts or ghettos. **Schools with a high percentage of Roma pupils are in most of the cases a result of residential segregation.** Analyzing RIQL (The Research Institute for the Quality of Life) database (1998) we can find that more than one quarter of Roma is living in isolated, homogenous communities. These communities are in fact cases of residential segregation.

However, to explain educational segregation only by residential segregation is not enough. Analysing our data about schools with a high percentage of Roma pupils we can conclude that a majority of these schools are situated to a relatively small distance from the neighbour schools of the same level (most likely schools with a non-Roma majority). **More than half from schools with over 50% Roma pupils are situated less than 3 km from the neighbour schools of the same level.**

Because the physical distance between Roma and non-Roma communities is relatively small (and implicitly distance between majority Roma schools and majority non-Roma schools) the explanation of educational segregation can be found in **social distance** between Roma minority and majority of population. Separate arrangements of schools may be in some cases a result of a **negative image of majority population against Roma minority**. Raised social distance between Roma and majority population can be an explanation for schools with high percentage of Roma pupils acceptance. Although social distance between Roma and majority population decreased seriously in latest years, it remains considerably higher. Roma population is further the most repudiated minority in Romania (in 1993, 71.8% from majority population reject the idea to have Roma people as neighbours. In 1995, the percentage decreases to 59.7%, being in 1999, 48.5%)².

² *Indicators concerning the Roma Communities in Romania*, RIQL, Bucharest, 2002

Considerable social distance which separate Romanian society from Roma minority is enhanced by **socio-economic discrepancies**, but also by a lot of **prejudices and stereotypes** which remained stable over time. Regarding social economic discrepancies statistics show that prevalence of poverty is higher in the case of Roma compared with Romanian society. Under the minimum level of subsistence³ (C. Zamfir, E. Zamfir, 1995:128) there are 62.9% of Roma people against the 16% of whole population. However, poverty is usually associated with a lower social status, therefore a negative public perception against the poor. Different ways of gaining incomes in rural area by the Roma strength also in public view the lower status of Roma. Most of rural Roma people do not have land in property being forced, in order to survive, to work as daily workers on their neighbours land or to seasonal migrate for work.

Regarding prejudices and stereotypes recent data reveal that majority population has a strongly negative image against Roma. The most frequently cited characteristics of Roma population by the majority are *dirty, thief, lazy*⁴.

Summarizing, we can say that segregated schools are a result of residential segregation; but in the same time, the social distance which divide Roma and majority population has a strong influence in maintaining *status quo*. This social distance is enhanced by substantial economic discrepancies and also by prejudices and stereotypes.

³ The minimum level of subsistence is defined as following: „...expenses on basic goods and services; clothes and shoes expenses for adults were not included, considering that these goods already exist in the household. The level of subsistence ensures the living expenses during relatively short term life sequence. To continue the living under this level it will has as consequences malnutrition and health depreciation” (*Dimensiuni ale saraciei*, Expert Publishing House, Bucharest, 1995)

⁴ *Interethnic Relations Barometer*, made by Metro Media Transilvania for Resources Centre for Ethno-cultural Diversity, November 2001:11

3. Dimensions of educational segregation⁵

For the picture of Roma pupils distribution in schools depending on percentage of Roma pupils, we will use hereinafter the following labels / categories:

- **Mixed schools** - we include here schools with a percentage of Roma pupils from 0,1 to 50%
- **Schools with a Roma majority** - the percentage of Roma pupils in these schools is from 50, 1% to 70%
- **Schools in which Roma pupils prevail** - are those schools with a percentage of Roma pupils from 70,1 % to 100%.

According to previous mentioned categories, rural schools in which learn also Roma pupils are distributed as following:

- 87,9% - mixed schools;
- 6,4% - schools with a Roma majority;
- 5,8% - schools in which Roma pupils prevail.

Number of Roma pupils who learn in schools with over 50% Roma is the following:

- In primary education (classes I-IV) learn 21,014 pupils;
- In secondary schools (gymnasium, classes V-VIII) - 10,640 pupils;
- In kindergartens are 6,680 Roma children.

In kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, in rural area, learn 38,472 Roma children in units with a majority of Roma or in which Roma prevail. If segregation patterns in urban and rural would be the same, taking into account urban-rural ratio (50% rural, 50% urban for kindergarten and 40% rural, 60% urban for primary and secondary school) result an estimation of 54,161 Roma pupils learning in urban area in segregated schools (over 50% Roma pupils). Adding Roma pupils from rural and urban, result an estimation of about 92,000 Roma pupils learning in schools over 50% Roma for the entire educational system.

⁵ Database MER, IES (Institute of Educational Sciences), RIQL, 1998, used for analysis, contain only school units from the rural. Consequently, when we use the statements <entire system> , <educational system> or simply, <system>, we refer at rural school system. For a comprehensive analysis, see Interim IPF report on www.policy.hu/surdu

Segregation tendencies are more salient for compulsory education (classes I-VIII) and especially primary education. More than half of the schools with over 50% Roma are schools with grade I-IV. Almost one third are schools grades I-VIII.

4. Quality of education evaluation in schools with a high percentage of Roma pupils

4.1. Evaluation of education quality by school achievements

In terms of school achievements our analysis highlights the following discrepancies:

- *Ratio of pupils who promote capacity exam* (filter exam from compulsory education to college or vocational school) is only **44,55%** for the schools in which Roma pupils prevail the ratio while for the educational system is **68%**.
- In schools with over 70% Roma pupils *ratio of pupils' failing to get their remove* is **11.27%**, being almost three times higher than for the educational system (**3.9%**). A successive failure (three consecutive years) leads to pupils' elimination from the school system because children go over legal age allowing schooling on primary school or gymnasium. In this sense a high ratio of failures in school is related with an increased drop out.
- *Attendance to school competitions* for the entire rural education system is 10%, while in schools which prevail Roma pupils this ratio decrease to 1.7%, being almost 6 times lower. In other words, if on average 1 pupil from 10 participates to school competitions, for schools in which prevail Roma pupils participate only 1 pupil from 60.
- Ratio of functional illiteracy is 17.6% for pupils enrolled in IV grade. This ratio increases to 35.7% in the case of pupils who drop out on IV grade. One third of Roma pupils who dropped out school on VI grade cannot read and write properly⁶.

⁶ RIQL survey, 1998. Although available data cannot be deducted by percentage of Roma pupils in a school, we believe that due to a lower quality of education in schools with a high percentage of Roma, most of functional illiterates come from this type of school.

4.2. *Evaluating quality of education by inputs: school facilities and human resources*

- Likelihood to have *overcrowded*⁷ classes in schools grade I-IV in which Roma pupils prevail it is more than 3 times higher comparing with the system. For schools grade I-VIII in which Roma pupils prevail this likelihood is more than 9 times higher than the system.
- In schools with a majority of Roma pupils, *library is missing* in almost 2 thirds of cases. In schools in which prevail Roma pupils this facility is missing in almost three-quarters of cases.
- Schools in which Roma pupils prevail indicate a *shortage of qualified teachers* in a percentage almost double (**83.5%**) comparatively with all rural schools (**43.5%**). Practically all schools over 50% Roma are confronting the problem of shortage of qualified teachers
- *Ratio of unqualified teachers in compulsory education* (primary and secondary school) is an indicator reflecting the intensity of lack of qualification phenomena. In the category “50-75% unqualified teachers”, the percentage of schools in which Roma prevail is 5 times higher than for the educational system. In the category “over 75% unqualified teachers”, the percentage of schools in which Roma prevail is 10 times higher than for the educational system.
- *Teachers employment fluctuation* means frequent changes in school’s personnel structure due to teachers moving from a school to another. Ratio of kindergartens over 50% Roma pupils with fluctuating instructors is over 5 times higher comparing with the educational system. Ratio of primary and secondary schools over 50% Roma pupils, with fluctuating teachers, is 3 times higher than for the educational system.

4.3. *Quality of education evaluation by beneficiaries’ expectations*

Most of individual or group discussions realised by us in different schools with many Roma pupils reveals an deep dissatisfaction of Roma parents regarding the level of knowledge and abilities achieved by their children in these schools. Parents complain about weak motivation of teachers to work with Roma pupils.

⁷ “School construction standards require 1.8 – 2.1 sqm per pupil within the classroom and 2.7 – 3 sqm per child in kindergarten” (*Invatamantul rural in Romania: conditii, probleme si strategii de dezvoltare*, MER, IES, Bucharest, 2000: 71)

Some teachers believe that Roma pupils have no chance to follow higher levels of education and they behave accordingly. These teachers have a low commitment, they underestimate Roma pupils potential and don't treat them individually. **The main objective regarding Roma education is the mere achievement of basic abilities (literacy).** Moreover, some teachers consider reading and writing a performance indicator and not a basic ability, which must be accomplished in the first two years of school. Fixing literacy as a final objective of primary school (sometimes even of secondary school), teachers' requests and expectations are often very low. A proof in this respect is the fact that some Roma pupils, who pass classes for years, attend sometimes even the gymnasium without knowing to read and write.

Majority of Roma parents are aware about the quality of education discrepancies between schools with a high percentage of Roma pupils and schools with another ethnic majority. For this reason some wealthy Roma parents prefer to enrol or to transfer their children in schools with another ethnic majority. In the same way act Romanian parents when they have to choose between a closer school but having a high percentage of Roma children and a far school without Roma (or with a low percentage of Roma pupils).

Most of Roma parents consider that it would be desirable for their children to learn in ethnic mixed schools not in schools with a majority of Roma children. Schools with a non-Roma majority pupils are perceived as better schools having better school facilities, human and financial resources. Parents who are in favor of mixed schools bring the following arguments:

- An increasing of education quality because of teachers' qualification and better facilities;
- An improvement of Roma pupils school achievements;
- Socializing Roma and non-Roma children together could have positive effects for Roma children (facilitating communication, cultural exchanges, avoiding social exclusion, interethnic tolerance);

- Increased expectations in the case of Roma pupils regarding their school future and opportunities (higher levels of education).

Particular cases of detrimental treatment of Roma pupils who learn in mixed schools make some Roma parents to be reluctant about possibility to mix Roma and non-Roma children in the same classes. Their reluctance is not against the idea of multiethnic school but against detrimental practices actually present in some mixed school. These practices refer to setting Roma children in the last desks, lack of Roma pupils' stimulation to be active in class, excluding Roma from extracurricular activities, tensioned relationship between Roma and non-Roma pupils and sometimes between Roma and their teachers. Some Roma parents are afraid that schooling together Roma and non-Roma pupils could rather strength segregation tendencies. Therefore, Roma children could be isolated in mixed schools because of majority prejudices and stereotypes and due to status differences. Economic and social status differences are visible in lack of school supplies, lack of adequate clothes and shoes, lack of meal, lack of money for extracurricular activities.

Roma children are more afraid than their parents to learn in the same class or school together with non-Roma children. They are frightened of being isolated, bad treated or even beaten. These fears are more salient in the case of pupils learning actually in schools with exclusively Roma children.

5. Policy options and recommendations

There are mainly three policy options to the problem of lower quality of education in so-called Roma schools. The first option is to maintain the *status quo*. The second one is to address the problem by improving the quality of education in segregated schools. The last one is to address the problem of education quality by school system desegregation. In the following we will briefly describe each considered option.

5.1. Status quo maintaining

When we considered *status quo* maintaining we understand a continuation of situation, which conducted to a lower education quality in segregated schools. In the same time, *status quo* maintaining means that ethnic composition of segregated schools will not be addressed. Maintaining *status quo* has negative consequences on school achievement and reduces “life chances” (in R. Dahrendorf terms) of Roma children. The economic and social costs of maintaining a dual educational system are very high and are reflected in the following:

- Lower quality of education received by Roma pupils in segregated schools is an obstacle in schooling on secondary education (a lower participation on vocational schools and colleges; an extremely low participation in higher education);
- Low level of schooling makes unemployment to be much higher in the case of Roma compared with total population;
- Low level of schooling induces that large part of Roma are in situation of extreme poverty producing marginalisation and social exclusion;
- A high incidence of illiteracy and especially of functional illiteracy compared with ensemble of population;
- As a consequence of high incidence of illiteracy on adult population (almost 50%) a large part of Roma are excluded from democratic process because they cannot fully exercise their right to vote. Illiteracy is an obstacle towards information on political matters (some Roma people cannot read electoral lists);
- Roma social exclusion, due in part of segregation in education, reduces Romania’s chances to integrate in UE. One of specific request of UE in the case of Romania is to integrate Roma in Romanian society.

We consider that economic and social costs of maintaining *status quo* in segregated schools, briefly outlined before, greatly exceed costs of intervention.

5.2. Improving the quality of education in segregated schools

The main focus of this type of policy is to improve quality of education in order to have better school achievement for Roma pupils and better social opportunities. The assumed

philosophy of this intervention is that if we improve the quality of education, Roma pupils will attend higher level of education and consequently will be more competitive on the labour market. Continuing argumentation, a better integration on the labour market will conduct, in time, to a better social and economic status for Roma population. This kind of option while addressing quality of education leaves uncovered the problem of segregation in itself. Assumption that social distance between Roma minority and majority population cannot be overcome is implicitly understood.

After 1989 almost all relevant actors (MER and NGOs) can be considered to play in the frame of this policy option. Almost all projects and programs developed by NGOs aim, in a way or another, to improve quality of education in these schools. Measures such teachers training, school development, improving school facilities and teaching materials, involving parents and communities, improving participation of Roma in extra-curricula activities can be considered policies in the frame of improving quality of education. Educational policies developed after 1989 with the main aim of introducing Romani language and culture in schools have also an indirect positive impact on education quality. These kinds of policies preserve Roma identity and, in the same time, increase Roma pupils' self-esteem and their motivation for learning. Hiring Roma teachers in some schools may improve education quality by providing models for pupils and increasing the trust in school. We can also suppose that measure of hiring inspectors for Roma in the whole country will positively influence quality of education in the long run.

5.3. Desegregation of school system

This policy option assumes that segregation in itself has a detrimental influence on Roma pupils and segregation has to be fight. Educational segregation is not only a cause of lower quality of education but also a cause of social exclusion of Roma from Romanian society. Ending segregation, by including Roma pupils in mainstream education will increase school achievements of Roma pupils but will also open a movement for an equal status in all social fields for Roma population. The success of a desegregation program

initiated in Bulgaria⁸ shows that school desegregation can be considered a viable policy option in the case of Roma education. Desegregation educational policies for Afro-American population, although in a different context, were developed in USA from 1954 (Brown against Board of Topeka case) until now. Although does not is an agreement among researchers regarding the impact of desegregation in USA on school achievements, almost all annalists agree that desegregation conducted to a huge Afro-Americans emancipation movement. However, desegregation can be in some cases a difficult option. American experience teaches us that desegregation is a longstanding process, with many stops and goes sequences. In Romania, social distance cannot be reduces overnight and moreover some Roma parents could refuse mixed education because they are afraid to not expose their children even to a worse treatment in mixed schools. Although desegregation is a difficult option we can assume that it can bring (as a “snowball”) a huge social impact consisting in equalizing status for Roma in many social fields.

What can be done?

Quality of education has to be considered a priority regarding educational policies for Roma pupils. Existent programs and projects, which address so-called Roma schools, have to make a further step from improving education quality to school desegregation. In schools with over 50% Roma pupils desegregation plans have to be made taking into account local contexts and stakeholders positions. There are some already validated modalities of desegregating schools: children transportation to schools with other ethnic majority, creating *magnet schools* which can attract non-Roma pupils in majority Roma schools, informing and helping Roma parents to send their children to better schools, removing bureaucratic barriers by redrawing school boundaries. Information is needed in order to adapt to local context and to choose the appropriate desegregation technique in each case. Anti-bias training for teachers is needed in order to create a friendly environment for Roma pupils in their new host schools. Also, Roma families have to be

⁸ *The desegregation of <Romani Schools> - A Condition for an Equal Start for Roma*”, Sofia, Bulgaria, April 27, 2001, report published by the *European Roma Rights Center* and *Open Society Institute’s Roma Participation Program*

help to equalize their children status in schools by clothes, shoes, writing materials, a free meal and so on.

However, in order to choose an option, a broad public debate must be initiated. In our view a good solution is a legitimate one, which take into account all relevant stakeholders positions. It is important that Roma parents voices to be heard before planning an educational policy targeting their children.