

**CHARACTERISTICS OF ROMA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS  
BASED ON SAMPLES FROM ROMA COLLEGES FOR ADVANCED STUDIES**

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**Abstract**

The study intends to present in a comparative manner the research conducted at the University of Pécs and the Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, which focuses on the family background, identity, school-related successes and failures of Roma students studying in tertiary education. The research was supplemented with information collected from the students of the Lippai Balázs Roma College for Advanced Studies at the University of Debrecen Faculty of Education for Children and Special Educational Needs.

**Keywords:** roma students, tertiary education

**Disciplines:** sociology, pedagogy

**Absztrakt**

ROMA SZÁRMAZÁSÚ EGYETEMI HALLGATÓK JELLEMZŐINEK VIZSGÁLATA SZAKKOLLÉGIUMI MINTÁK ALAPJÁN

A tanulmány arra vállalkozik, hogy komparatív jelleggel bemutassa a Pécsi Tudományegyetemen és az Eszterházy Károly Katolikus Egyetemen végzett kutatást, amely fókuszában a felsőoktatásban tanuló roma származású hallgatók családi háttere, identitása, iskolával kapcsolatos sikerei és kudarcai állnak. A kutatást kiegészítettük a Debreceni Egyetem Gyermeknevelési és Gyógypedagógiai Karán működő Lippai Balázs Roma Szakkollégium hallgatóitól gyűjtött információkkal.

**Kulcsszavak:** roma tanulók, felsőoktatás

**Diszciplínák:** szociológia, pedagógia

### **Introduction**

In recent years, all kinds of topics related to Roma communities in Hungary have become more and more sensitive. The roots of the issues related to the difficulties of the social integration of Roma people can be traced back to the fact that the Roma, as an ethnic minority, differs from national minorities in several areas. Compared to the national minorities in Hungary, the Roma can be considered as a marginalized social group (Forray and Hegedűs, 1998). The fact that their standard of living, which primarily means life expectancy at birth, health status, and education, can be regarded as a specific characteristic of the group, is significantly lower compared to the majority society.

When approaching the role of the Roma in society from a different angle, we can say that they can be considered a transnational or transcultural minority, that is, they have adopted the language and cultural features of their environment to a certain extent. Based on this characteristic, the researchers used to call the Roma people the „most European” people in Europe, and in this, they see the chance that the Roma can contribute to the success of European integration in the future (Havas and Kemény, 1995).

However, in order to achieve success at the European level, the integration of the Roma minority communities must first be solved at the level of the nation states.

Personally and based on my research experience, I see the key to success primarily in education, because I believe that as long as there is no strong Roma intelligentsia in Hungary, it is impossible to remedy the Roma problem at its roots. Based on this idea, the aim of this study is two-fold. On the one hand, with reflective processing of the specialized literature, it provides a short, overview of the educational situation of Roma communities in Hungary and the escalating problems arising from it. On the other hand, the study presents non-representative research, the focus of which is on students of Roma origin participating in higher education.

### **Facts and conclusions regarding the education of the Roma in Hungary**

In recent decades, under the leadership of István Kemény, three nationally representative surveys of the Roma population in Hungary have been conducted. The first research was carried out in 1971, the objective of which was to provide a comprehensive picture of the social situation of the Roma people, their mother tongue and ethnic distribution, their socio-cultural situation, and the impact of industrialization in the 1950s and 1960s (Kemény et al., 2004). The investigation conducted in 1993 focused primarily on the impact of the economic and social changes caused by the system change on the Roma. The 2003 study analyzed the situation of the Hungarian Roma people from the perspective of the changes that took place in the previous decade (economy, labor market, incomes) (Kemény et al., 2004).

All three surveys covered the entire Roma population of Hungary. According to this, the research included not only the capital but also rural towns and villages. The data collection included Hungarian, Roma, and Romanian, so-called Beas native-speaking Gypsies. From the research outlined above, the data related to the education of Roma people stand out.

By comparing the educational statistics of the three surveys, it can be shown that although the educational situation of the Roma has improved in the last thirty years, the lag is very significant compared to the majority society. By the 1990s, 31.3% of Gypsy children had successfully completed their primary education at the age of 14, this ratio was 43.6% among 15-year-olds, 62.6% among 16-year-olds, and 64.4% among 17-year-olds, and at the age of 18, 77.7% have a primary school certificate (Kemény et al., 2004).

From the direction of public opinion and education policy, we often hear that more and more graduates of Roma origin are needed who can serve as an example and help their own local community. However, the formation of a stable Roma intelligentsia still has a long way to go, especially if we take into account that the roots of

the education and upbringing problems of Roma children can be traced back to kindergarten (Darvas and, Tausz, 2005). The researches of István Kemény and his work group confirm that, in the case of Roma children, significant problems can be detected even at the earliest level of institutional socialization. Statistical data from 1993 show that the majority of Roma children "drop out" already in kindergarten. One of the main reasons for this is communication difficulties resulting from bilingualism.

Based on the data from 1993 and 2003, it appears that in the ten years between the two researches, the number of children of Roma origin who regularly attend kindergarten continued to decrease. In Varga Aranka's study, we can read that this is partly due to the fact that kindergartens in the area most affected by the Roma do not have sufficient capacity (Varga, 2018). From the perspective of nearly twenty years, an improving trend can be observed in this area, the capacity of kindergartens has increased to a large extent.

The literature on preschool education emphasizes the importance of early childhood education. Insufficiently effective kindergarten socialization primarily affects children from Roma and/or disadvantaged families. It can be traced back to the lack of a primary socialization environment and adequate preschool education that Roma children fall behind their peers already in the first grade of elementary school, and their disadvantage increases more and more. From the results of Katalin Pik's research, she concluded that approximately 10% of school-age Roma students were unfit to enter the primary education system, which means that the dropout of Roma students begins even before they enter primary school (Pik, 1999). Recognizing the problem, the education policy stipulated in the national public education law that from September 1, 2014, preschool education is mandatory from the age of three. The results of this measure will be detectable only years later. It is a common belief, however, that the dividing line regarding the education of the Roma in Hungary is no longer the primary school, as it

was in the period before the regime change. Secondary education became the critical point.

This can be supported by the research results of István Kemény, which showed that while in 1971 86% of the Roma in Hungary did not have a primary education, by 1993 this proportion had decreased to 42%, and the 2003 data collection further confirms this the trend (Havas and Kemény, 1995). However, there are differences between the individual Roma groups in terms of obtaining a general education. In 2003, 84% of young Roma between the ages of 20 and 24 whose mother tongue is Hungarian completed primary school. almost the same rate (85%) can be observed in the case of the Beas gypsies, but the rate is lower in the case of the Oláh gypsies, it is 72%. (Havas and Kemény, 1995). In comparison with the majority society, it can be stated that in the 1990s, 81% of the majority society graduated from primary school at the age of 14, but only 31% of Roma children were able to complete their primary education on time. Unfortunately, it can still be observed today that a relatively significant number of Roma students can only obtain their primary school certificate at the age of 16.

Regardless of all of this, getting a high school diploma has become a really critical point today. In secondary schools, there is a much greater difference between students of Roma and non-Roma origin. In the 16-19 age group, 85% of non-Roma attend some kind of secondary education institution, in the case of young people of Roma origin, this ratio is only around 58%. According to the Life Path Survey of the Tárki Research Institute, 46% of young people of Gypsy origin born in 1991 completed secondary school, but only 22% obtained a high school diploma (Hajdú et al, 2014). Although the listed statistical indicators do not give cause for excessive optimism, if we consider the performance of previous generations as a reference point, then we can definitely talk about progress.

The reason for the low proportion of Roma with high school diplomas is mainly due to their underachievement in primary school since the basic skills that can be acquired in basic education

are incomplete. Language disadvantage, social situation and inadequate family socialization further deepen the problems (Huszár, 2015). Attila Z. Papp (2008) clarifies the issue of Roma's low level of school performance by introducing an additional aspect. According to his point of view, the underachievement of Roma students in school may also depend on the location of the given school and the economic situation of the region. The sociologist draws attention to the ghettoized elementary schools, where the situation of Gypsy students is the worst and most hopeless, and their segregation continues to strengthen.

### **Tertiary Education**

After the data and processes outlined above, it is difficult to imagine that it is even possible to talk about higher education in relation to the Roma. Although extremely underrepresented, we find students of Roma origin at colleges and universities. We do not have exact data on how many Roma students reach higher education, as no reliable survey has been prepared. However, the scholarship statements of the Public Foundation for Gypsies of Hungary, which were analyzed by Katalin R. Forray, can be considered as a starting point (Forray, 2003). According to the analysis, thousands of people use the benefit every year.

Here I would like to quote a paragraph from András Zsuppán's article published in Magyar Narancs in 2003: „A survey carried out this year by Kálmán Gábor, an employee of the Educational Research Institute, showed that 1.2 percent of the 200,000 full-time students, while 2.5 percent of the evening and correspondence students identified themselves as Roma, which is more than double the previously known figures. This result is also surprising because five years ago, only a few hundred Roma students participated in higher education: the breakthrough season was 1998-99 when three times as many Roma were enrolled as before.”

The favorable trend dates back to the beginning of the 2000s, although the majors and specializations chosen by Roma students show an

„unhealthy” structure, as they mainly study social pedagogy, teaching or kindergarten pedagogy, and it is very difficult to find a student of Roma origin in the medical or technical faculties. The research presented below supports the trend and characteristics outlined above.

### **The samples of Pécs and Eger**

In addition to national and European researchers (e.g. Michael Stewart), a surprisingly large number of overseas specialists have dealt with the situation of the Roma in Hungary in the last decade. It is a typical tendency for American sociologists to compare the socioeconomic and social situation of the Roma with the situation of African-Americans in the majority of cases (Stewart, 1994). During their research work, they pay special attention to the education of Roma students, their further education opportunities, their motivation, and their success in higher education institutions.

The study intends to report on specific American research, which was carried out on students of Roma origin at the University of Pécs. This research was repeated a few years later at Károly Eszterházy University, so it is possible to compare the results of the two researches.

The research is attributed to Professor Jason Morris, who came to Pécs from Texas in 2009 with a Fulbright scholarship. The researcher found that no large-scale empirical research has been conducted among Roma students in higher education in Hungary (Ana and William, 2002). Partly because of this, he wanted to investigate the family background, identity, and future goals of students of Roma origin studying in higher education. In addition, he was curious about the previous academic results of the subjects of the research and their educational successes and failures. Based on this, he wanted to examine the factors that led to school success.

Jason Morris conducted his research with focus groups and semi-structured interviews with individuals. In terms of the examined areas, the research aimed to study 12 specific questions but concentrated the actual analytical work on three

main focal points. The first was the family background and childhood: how they lived their childhood and what kind of experience the students came from. The second major topic was the topic of identity. Here, they wanted to map the students' relationship to their own cultural community, and what role the Romani language plays in their lives was included as a question. The third priority area of the research was education. Here, the researchers wanted to find out about previous successes and failures. The main goal was to obtain information about how Roma students relate to learning activities. In addition, the socio-cultural factors behind the successes were studied, and a separate question dealt with what role models they could mention in the field of education. Finally, they were curious about the form in which they intend to use the acquired knowledge, from the point of view of their own local community.

First, I present the research results that reveal how sociocultural background determines school performance. These were the areas, in both the Pécs and Eger samples, where the answers were the most similar. Most of the interviews revealed that the students come from very poor families and financial instability plays a significant role in all cases. At the same time, after an in-depth analysis of the interview texts, the researchers found that the students of Roma origin did not lose hope at all in a psychosocial sense. Their modest financial circumstances encouraged them to achieve more.

In addition to all this, the analysis of the text of the interviews with the students revealed that close family ties gained special importance. An interesting connection to this is that many people mentioned family members as people who provided support in their learning activities or acted as role models, who in many cases only had a general education, but considered knowledge as a value and an important tool in terms of social integration.

Another important aspect of the research concerned the connections of ethnic identity. In this area, the difference between the Pécs and Eger samples was large. Many of the Pécs students

stated that their Roma identity was not actually lived. In contrast, for the students of Eger, their Roma identity is very important and is absolutely lived. Regardless of these, Ilona Fekete reports that the Romani language was much more important for the students in Pécs, because all the students spoke some kind of Romani language, and none of the students in Eger, with the exception of one person, spoke Romani language. This correlation of the research makes it clear that in the case of Roma students studying in higher education, language and ethnic identity do not show a strict correlation.

#### **The sample of Debrecen**

I carried out the research presented above regarding the students of the Lippai Balázs Roma College for Advanced Studies at the University of Debrecen Faculty of Education for Children and Special Educational Needs. I carried out the research by relying on documentary series titled „Who are we... and why?” conducted by Gábor Biczó and Csaba Dallos. The short films are intended to show the living conditions and families of students of Roma origin, mainly kindergarten teachers. They were made using the narrative interview technique of documentaries, and I provide interview texts with a thematic structure similar to the Pécs and Eger research, film analysis is therefore a suitable method in this case.

During the analysis of the short films, my first point of observation was the analysis of the family background and childhood memories (living conditions, the relationship between the family and the school, and positive and negative memories from childhood). In general, it can be stated that in almost all cases the parents were undereducated, and in the case of several students, it also happened that one of the parents did not even have a basic education. At the same time, we can point out a case that contradicts this trend. The mother of the siblings from Nagykálló, majoring in kindergarten education, obtained a high school diploma and a profession alongside her family, but this is an exception.

In all cases, the students considered it important to emphasize that despite the financial instability of their families, their parents supported their studies. However, in many cases, the biggest problem was not the financial support, but rather the Roma traditions. It is difficult to accept that young girls choose further education instead of starting a family in the closed and fundamentally conservative norm-following practices of the Oláh communities. However, it is interesting to observe that the relatively closed Roma community, which adheres closely to its traditions, does not share its members who go against the traditions. In every case, the students declared that their community was proud of them and considered them role models. I believe that this also induces a kind of change in values, the long-term results of which can promote successful Roma integration.

The second point of observation was the question of identity. Compared to the samples from Pécs and Eger, it can be said that the ethnic identity of the students of the Lippai Balázs Roma College for Advanced Studies corresponds to the perception of self-identity of the students of Eger. For the students of the University of Debrecen, their Roma origin is extremely important. They follow Roma traditions and are proud to speak the Romani language.

The third observation aspect of the studied documentaries was the field of education. The students singled out the people who motivated them in their studies and saw them as role models. For example, one ethnic kindergarten teacher student from Hodász chose the career of kindergarten teacher as her future profession because she had a strong memory of being able to understand herself better with the Roma nanny in the kindergarten. In this context, it is important to consider the profession of kindergarten teacher as a kind of helping profession, with which you want to be active in your community.

It is quite obvious that the very early school dropout of Roma children who speak Romani as their mother tongue can often be traced back to communication difficulties arising from bilingualism. It would prove to be an effective

solution to the problem if the secondary socialization of children of Roma origin was facilitated by kindergarten teachers and teachers of Roma origin. A pioneering role in achieving this can be attributed to the Gypsy/Roma specialized bachelor's degree of the ethnic kindergarten teacher in Hajdúböszörmény. Without exception, every student has the prospect of returning to their local community. With their life path, they want to serve as role models for local Roma children, believing, as Zsanett from Nagykálló puts it in her short film: "The situation is not hopeless, but there is no one to offer a hand." (Biczó and Dallos, 2016)

### Summary

In summary, it can be said about the research outlined above that due to the number of students forming the basis of the investigation, we can speak of a small sample analysis for all three universities. As a result, we cannot formulate comprehensive conclusions in any case. The aim of the research is to shed some light on the attitudes and vision of students of Roma origin in three different regions of Hungary. The most important result of the research is that: there are people of Roma origin in Hungary who are not only attached to their community but are also willing to do something for it, either by setting an example or through their chosen profession, because they believe that they will be able to help their peers when they return to their community. And the key to successful Roma integration in the long term is precisely rooted in this process.

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