

TEACHER'S PERCEPTION ABOUT THE SCHOOL PERFORMANCE OF ROMA STUDENTS

Author:

Norbert Tóth
University of Debrecen (Hungary)

Reviewers:

Antal Lovas-Kiss (Ph.D.)
University of Debrecen (Hungary)

Henriett Szabó (Ph.D.)
University of Debrecen (Hungary)

E-mail address of the author:
toth.norbert@ped.unideb.hu

...and two other anonymous reviewers

Tóth, Norbert (2023). Teacher's Perception about the School Performance of Roma Students. *Special Treatment Interdisciplinary Journal* [Különleges Bánásmód Interdiszciplináris folyóirat], 9. (4). 139-146. DOI [10.18458/KB.2023.4.139](https://doi.org/10.18458/KB.2023.4.139)

Abstract

The current paper aims to shed light on the problem of Roma students' school performance through the perception of teachers. We examine the phenomenon at the level of locality, relying on qualitative research methodology. The empirical data collection was carried out at the István Király Baptist Primary School in Kótaj, in the county of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, during which semi-structured interviews were recorded (N=15).

Keywords: teachers, Roma students, school performance

Disciplines: sociology

Absztrakt

PEDAGÓGUSOK ROMA TANULÓK ISKOLAI TELJESÍTMÉNYÉVEL KAPCSOLATOS PERCEPCIÓJA

Jelen tanulmány arra vállalkozik, hogy a pedagógusok percepcióján keresztül világítson rá a roma tanulók iskolai teljesítményének problematikájára. A jelenséget a lokalitás szintjén vizsgáljuk kvalitatív kutatómódszertani apparátusra támaszkodva. Az empirikus adatgyűjtés a Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg vármegyében található, kótaji István Király Baptista Általános Iskola tantestületében valósult meg, amely során félig strukturált interjúk kerültek rögzítésre (N=15).

Kulcsszavak: pedagógusok, roma tanulók, iskolai teljesítmény

Diszciplína: szociológia

Several studies draw attention to the fact that the teacher's expectations and the image of the children have an impact on the student's performance (Forray and Óhidy, 2019; Bocsi, Varga and Fehérvári, 2023). This risk is constantly present during the learning process, and certain students will be excluded or even "disadvantaged" in their academic progress due to the expectations of their teachers.

In our research, we were interested in what kind of perception teachers have about Roma students, and what effect this has on the school performance of Roma students. In addition, we considered it a key question to map how, in the case of Roma students, the teachers see the elements of cultural difference compared to the children of the majority society, and what they see as the reasons for Roma students' failure at school. We know from research that pedagogues often blame Roma families exclusively for school failure, and their argument does not even mention that the school system should adapt to minority students and implement culturally identical pedagogy (Rákó and Bocsi, 2020; Tóth, 2022). We wanted to examine the phenomenon at the local level, at an elementary school in Kótaj, a village in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County.

The total population of Kótaj reaches almost 4,500 people. According to KSH data, in 2001, 4.4% of the population of the county declared themselves to be of Roma origin, and in 2011, 8% of the resident population (Tar and Hajnal, 2014). Although Kótaj is located in a fundamentally disadvantaged region in the eastern part of the country, it can be considered a well-lived settlement due to its specific economic and geographical location within the region. Local residents are provided with favourable infrastructural facilities and almost the entire range of services is available.

Methodology

During the research, we relied on a qualitative research methodology. We conducted semi-

structured interviews with the deputy head of the institution and the teachers of the István Király Baptist Primary School in Kótaj (N=15). The interview questions tried to cover all important segments of pedagogical practice. We considered as key information the length of time the given teacher has been teaching at the school, because in light of this, we tried to find out how the situation of the institution developed during the presence of the particular teacher focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of the school.

We inclined to get information about the differences that can be detected among students from the perspective of the teachers. We were curious about which factor can be regarded the most significant: the minority status or the sociocultural situation of the family. Furthermore, we also wanted to examine that why Roma students are not successful even when the family has a satisfactory financial background.

During the interview, we attached particular importance to the knowledge the teachers have about Roma in Hungary, for example, are they aware of which Roma groups live in Hungary and what proportion of them attend the given school. In this context, we tried to map the teachers' perception of the Roma culture and, based on their previous pedagogical practice, whether they can mention any cultural factors that directly or indirectly hinder the school progress of students of Roma origin.

Results of the empirical data

The literature dealing with school socialization draws attention to the fact that the individual sociocultural patterns of students are multiplied by local conditions, such as the unfavourable situation of the given settlement, and within that, the educational institution (Varga, 2018; Mező and Mező, 2019). Starting from this sociological foundation, we considered it important to know what kind of infrastructural and personnel conditions the

primary school has, and what kind of quality it can offer students during pedagogical practice.

We asked the teachers to rate their school in the light of how many years they have been working in the institution, and to address how the situation of the school has changed during this period, primarily in the sense of what the strengths and weaknesses of the school were before, and these how they have changed over time. We were essentially curious about the same problems the institution has to deal with now, as in previous decades, and how the school copes with the possible obstacles induced by the new situation.

It is clear from the interviews that serious changes have taken place in the life of the school in recent decades. The most striking and most noteworthy trend is that the school operates with a decreasing number of children, which of course is greatly contributed to by the appearance of national demographic processes at the local level, but from this point of view, the situation of the primary school in Kótaj is made difficult by the proximity of Nyíregyháza, which has a serious "attractive power". The teacher, who has been working at the school for more than three decades, described the situation as follows:

„The children has also changed, the number of staff has also changed, so there are far fewer children than before. In the past, In the middle of the 2000s and maybe even at the end, three classes ran simultaneously, in parallel, but now we are happy if there are two classes. It is lucky that the maintainer allows this.” (Teacher 11)

In relation to the tendentious decrease in the number of children, a teacher who has been teaching at the school for 32 years draws attention to an important factor that has greatly influenced the educational program of the institution in recent years. The expert emphasizes that the gradual decrease in the number of children in the school, which previously had more than 400 students, resulted in a serious change in the student composition. Due to the fact that middle-class

parents living in better financial conditions took their children from the local school to Nyíregyháza to be taught, the number of disadvantaged students in the village school thus increased disproportionately. The emerging situation demanded a rethinking of the pedagogical culture and the formulated educational goals, and the emphasis shifted from talent management to catch-up.

In addition to ensuring the number of students, the school must also make serious efforts regarding the provision of appropriate majors. Although at the moment all subjects are taught by pedagogues with appropriate professional qualifications, the employment of pedagogues teaching science and skill subjects is an ongoing difficulty:

„One of our biggest difficulties is that we have to make very serious efforts to ensure specialist care. We cannot find a chemistry teacher. We have a physics teacher, but at that moment, if he wasn't there, I have no idea where we would have a physics teacher from. There has not been a drawing teacher at the school for maybe five or six years, but a lady comes twice a week on an individual commission basis.” (Teacher 15)

According to the teachers' point of view, the situation of the school is also complicated by the fact that the behaviour pattern of the local society has changed to a great extent even in the past decade, which affects the attitude of parents and children towards school. One teacher expressed it as follows:

„A lot has changed. The world has also changed socially, and we can sense this at the local level at the school. There is an almost completely different composition of children and parents, they already approach the work of education in a completely different way.” (Teacher 5)

In relation to the above, the teachers considered it important to emphasize the large lack of motivation. From the individual interview excerpts, we can conclude that when motivating students, the teachers tried all forms of the toolkit that could be used, and they all stated that they would even need external help, which would make them even more

competent in terms of motivating students during their work as teachers:

„Actually, I don't think there is any weakness in terms of pedagogy. The problem is caused by the fact that the children are becoming more and more unmotivated, and it is becoming more and more difficult to get them to study. It is increasingly difficult to make them understand that there is only one way for their future, which is to study. (...) Maybe it would be best if someone taught us how to help children to be more motivated.” (Teacher 5)

Almost all of the interviewed teachers mentioned that one of the main strengths of the school is its infrastructural facilities. The institution has a wide range of ICT tools, which makes a modern learning environment accessible to all students. Quoting the words of a teacher who has worked at the school since the beginning of the 2000s:

„I consider the strength of the school is its equipment. I think it is very good for being a village school. Recently, our school has improved a lot. Almost every room has a projector and projection screen, so there are actually all the tools for modern education. All the conditions are given for the children, so that on the one hand they feel good at school, and on the other hand, from the point of view of learning and teaching, we also have more tools in our hands to hold more interesting lessons.” (Teacher 12)

As a second feature, the teachers emphasized the child-centeredness of the school, and in this context they explained that the decreasing number of children is very worrying from the point of view of the legitimacy of the institution and organizational functioning, but from a pedagogical point of view it is beneficial that more teacher attention is given to a student. All this, the school also studied various programs in the field of talent development, and it does all this with a highly qualified, prepared and cohesive teaching staff.

Within the framework of the next block of questions, we wanted to map the main differences that teachers believe they discover between students of Roma and non-Roma origin. In the following, we present various interview excerpts,

which provide a comprehensive picture of the image of the Roma students in the teaching staff of the primary school in Kótaj:

„Roma students in our settlement are already so civilized that they could be taught if they went to school, but they prefer to avoid school, it is difficult to get them to go to school regularly.” (Educator 2)

„I see the greatest importance in where the child of Roma origin is, in which environment, in which community, because if he is in the settlement, then the motivation is significantly lower. If the same child of Roma origin lives in the village, there is less of an environment that distracts him from what he needs to do.” (Teacher 14)

„I think that what I think is most important is the parent's education and attitude to work. (...) He is left behind not because he might belong to the Roma ethnic group, but the point is what kind of social and cultural space he comes from. As a result, he does not know those standards, there is no internal motivation.” (Teacher 7)

It is clear from the above quotations that the problems related to the school progress of Roma children in Kótaj cannot be connected with the peculiarity characteristic of several Hungarian settlements, according to which the children live in extreme poverty, and thus the everyday conditions necessary for schooling are not provided. Based on the teachers' report, the Roma families in Kótaj live at a suitable standard of living to properly educate their children. The most striking difference can be discovered between families living in the "settlement", that is, in the segregated area, and those who moved out of it. The segregated environment has a negative effect on the children's school performance, since the Roma children who have moved out of the segregated school are able to achieve success in school, thus avoiding the milieu in which the children are characterized by a complete lack of motivation. In addition, the education, mentality and attitude of the Roma parents in relation to learning are at least as important. In several aspects, the teachers emphasize that successful academic progress can only be achieved

if the parents are also partners and support their children's progress at school.

From the reports of the teachers, we consider it necessary to highlight one more important, repeated element, sociability. The phenomenon is not related to local conditions, as the literature has also noticed the phenomenon. Podráczy (2012) also pointed out that students of Roma origin can be treated particularly well in the lower grades of primary school, even compared to their non-Roma peers. At the same time, if we compare the characteristics reported by the teachers regarding the Roma students in the lower and upper grades, we can see that the diligence and behaviour of the fifth and sixth graders deteriorates exponentially, and they are increasingly unmanageable for the school. We illustrate the local phenomenon with excerpts from interviews with the teachers of the primary school in Kótaj:

„I have had countless cases when the little girl was an almost excellent student from the first to the fourth grade, I even took her to recitation competitions, and when she entered the upper grades, something completely changed, I think also because of the family influence.” (Teacher 2)

„At the bottom, they are still withdrawn, even more enthusiastic, but when they enter the fifth grade, something changes in them, so we often say that something changes in them there, they do not take learning seriously at all. Although this is obviously not only the case with Roma students, but it is much more evident among them.” (Teacher 15)

The teachers mentioned only very minimal characteristics when defining the differences between students of Roma and non-Roma origin. At the same time, based on the pedagogical anthropological approach of our research, we consider the mapping of the cultural elements that have an impact, even in a latent way, on the school progress of Roma students to be a key question. We thought that in addition to detecting the cultural elements that affect specific learning, it is also worth asking the teachers what kind of Roma groups attend the

school, and basically what cultural and other information they have about the local Roma population.

From the interviews, we came to the conclusion that most of the teachers gained insight into the everyday life of Roma families through the children's behaviour at school and interactions with parents, and are aware of the main characteristics of the minority group. At the same time, it became clear from several points of view that, beyond the perception formed by school experiences, the majority of teachers do not have deeper Romology knowledge about Roma groups in Hungary.

Among the cultural elements, most teachers mentioned that the local Roma students speak the Romani language. The religion of the local Roma minority, the celebration of various family holidays to a greater extent than the average, and the regular wearing of a remarkably large amount of gold jewellery in everyday life have come to light. In addition to these cultural elements, one of the teachers also considered the excessive enforcement of the will of Roma children within the family to be a minority cultural factor that is particularly characteristic of the Roma community in Kótaj. For the sake of perceptive illustration, the most important interview excerpts are presented below:

„They speak the Romani language and in Kótaj, as far as I know, the Romani language has such a kind of simplified version. I once spoke with a student who said that when the people of Budapest start speaking Romani language, he does not always understand everything.” (Teacher 7)

„I would mention religion. They go to church, they have their own church, they are very religious. What is still characteristic of them is the preparation of traditional Roma dishes. They also hold a special Roma village day, where we are also invited and welcomed very warmly.” (Teacher 6)

During the processing of the empirical data, we came to the conclusion that the teachers basically do not or only attribute minimal importance to the Roma cultural elements from the point of view of the school progress of the students belonging to

the Roma minority. At the same time, it was clearly revealed that in this respect a marked difference can be observed between Roma boys and girls. The teachers are of the opinion that, in the vast majority of cases, female students of Roma origin are not motivated to study because the family milieu does not set any expectations for them, and this clearly stems from the status attributed to the female role in Roma culture. The teachers put this to the point and vividly:

„With girls, I feel that it is because of the family background, and probably also because of the culture, that the girls' job is to give birth to children, run a household, and thus they are not motivated to go to school, so the girls become more depressed. Even if they do enrol in high school, they leave within a short time. It is more typical for boys that they still learn a profession.” (Teacher 5)

After getting to know the main characteristics of the school, as well as the composition of the students, and after mapping the position of the Roma students within the institution, we were curious to know what kind of "action plan" the István Király Baptist Primary School in Kótaj has in relation to catching up with disadvantaged students. We also tried to find out whether within the framework of these professional programs there are any that are specifically designed to promote the school progress of students of Roma origin, taking into account belonging to minority existence and culture.

In order to help disadvantaged students in their studies, the school staff makes serious efforts, and in the everyday pedagogic practice of the school, compensation for the disadvantages stemming from the socio-cultural background plays a prominent role. Primarily, in the lower grades, but in several cases also in the upper grades, teachers participate in family visits.

For students with lower academic results, teachers advocate the so-called afternoon study room, in the framework of which they receive personalized help from specialist teachers in several

subjects. The classroom has proven to be a successful pedagogical practice for several decades, but the real pedagogical innovation in the area of disadvantage compensation was the Integration Pedagogical System (hereafter IPR) introduced on September 1, 2008. Due to the high proportion of disadvantaged and cumulatively disadvantaged students, the program elements were tried to be included in the curriculum of all grades. Within the framework of the IPR, the main task of the school staff was to create suitable pedagogical conditions for all children to develop their abilities, to ensure that all school services are available to all students through the non-segregational organization of education. In addition, the development of the social relations of the student community and the involvement of parents in school decision-making processes related to children were formulated as important goals.

Based on the results of research on the school performance of Roma students, it can be considered of decisive importance what kind of expectations the family milieu places on the children, and what kind of behaviour the parents convey in relation to school. Based on this, in the next block of questions, we wanted to map how the teachers see the educational style of the Roma families in Kótaj.

The answers received can basically be categorized according to two main organizing principles. On the one hand, the pedagogues highlighted in several aspects that the parents' educational style is characterized by inconsistency and excessive indulgence, several pedagogues also so-called he talked about "monkey love". The minority of parents is characterized by complete disinterest. In addition to the educational tasks, it also assigns educational functions to the school, and in addition, the establishment of a partnership between the school and the parents represents a serious difficulty. Most of the teachers participating in the research gave answers to our question similar to the following:

„The parent does not look for the school at all, so it is more typical that the teacher looks for him, calls him on the phone, or just goes to visit the family. In such cases, they apparently show cooperation, so they nod that it will be this way and it will be that way, but there is not much appearance of this.”(Teacher 12)

„There are also parents who pay attention, but for many of them I can say that, if not that they are negligent, they handle things more relaxed. I think this also comes from the culture. From this point of view, I could perhaps compare them to the Italians, that they also lead a more relaxed way of life, and then something happens anyway, and so the children also grow up in a freer spirit, which of course would not be a problem, but school comes with constraints.”(Teacher 15)

It is also clear from the above empirical data that Roma families attach minimal importance to school in terms of educating and preparing children for life. On the part of the parents, the only requirement is that their children obtain at least the primary school certificate. In this context, we considered it necessary to ask the teachers about what the school expects from the Roma students, and what can be considered success in their case.

In each case, the teachers emphasized that they do not differentiate between Roma and non-Roma students, as the same requirements apply to all students. At the same time, we thought we could sense the appearance of the Pygmalion-effect during the conversations with the teachers: *„We acknowledge that they come from a different environment and maybe that is why people are even more lenient, but of course we try to be consistent.”(Teacher 1)*

Like the Roma parents, the teachers consider it a success if the Roma students obtain a general school leaving certificate, but their work would be considered truly successful if they were able to offer an attractive further education alternative for the Roma students as well, and if they were able to influence the students to live the opportunities given by circumstances.

Partly starting from the above premise, in the framework of the last block of questions, we wanted to scrutinize what, according to the teachers' professional opinion, could be the solution to meaningfully promote the school success of Roma students. We were able to sort the answers we received into three main groups. All of the interviewees mentioned the importance of the family background and the system of values and norms related to school conveyed by the parents to the children.

The teachers saw the second most frequently mentioned possible solution in the systematic introduction of differentiated education. It is important to point out that this does not mean segregation on the basis of ethnicity, but rather the education of students with lower academic results, who are mostly disadvantaged, in a separate group in certain subjects, and after achieving better academic results, the student would have the opportunity to transfer to the "better" group. From the beginning of the 2000s to the end of the decade, this pedagogical practice worked successfully, however, the decreasing number of children did not make it possible to differentiate a class in this way. The school is strongly committed to reintroducing the previously successful method. Preparations for practical implementation have already begun.

The third most frequently mentioned element was related to further education. The teachers emphasized that it would be important for the students and their parents to have a better look at the operation of secondary schools offering the profession, and learning about the employment potential inherent in learning certain professions could also be a serious motivating factor.

Conclusion

In the light of the empirical data presented in the study, we believe that with the help of the interviews with the teachers, we got a comprehensive

picture of the pedagogical practices of István Király Baptist Primary School in Kótaj. The local conditions that can be observed in the institution testify to the fact that the school staff makes serious efforts to support the academic progress of disadvantaged students. At the same time, we must also point out that the traditional means of catch-up play a central role in pedagogical practice, which, based on the experience of the past decades, have not been able to achieve resounding success. In order to work effectively, pedagogical innovation and personalized learning support (Mező, 2018) would definitely be necessary.

References

- Bocsi V., Varga A., Fehérvári A. (2023). Chances of Early School Leaving – With Special Regard to the Roma Identity. *Education Sciences*, 13 (5). 1-14.
- Forray R. K., Óhidy A. (2019). The situation of Roma women in Europe: Increasing success in education – Changing roles in family and society. *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*, 9 (1). 1-8. DOI [10.1556/063.9.2019.1.1](https://doi.org/10.1556/063.9.2019.1.1)
- Mező K.; Mező F. (2019). Iskolai sikerek és kudarcok. In Vargáné, Nagy Anikó (szerk.) *Családi nevelés: Prevenziós családi kiadvány*. Budapest, Magyarország: Forstag Nonprofit Közhasznú Kft. (93-103)
- Mező, K. (2018). A személyre szabott tanulást támogató tanári kompetenciák. *Katedra*, 25: 10. 12-14.
- Podráczky, J. (2012). „Érdektelen szülők” – Különböző nézőpontok. In Podráczky, Judit (szerk.). *Szövetségben. Tanulmányok a család és az intézményes nevelés kapcsolatáról*. Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Kiadó (125-142.)
- Rákó E., Bocsi V. (2020). Roma szakkollégisták Hajdú-Bihar megyében. *Különleges Bánásmód*, 6. (4). 41–60. DOI [10.18458/KB.2020.4.41](https://doi.org/10.18458/KB.2020.4.41)
- Tar F., Hajnal B., (2014). Nemzetiségek Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg megyében, különös tekintettel a romákra. *Terrületi Statisztika*, 54 (5). 491-505.
- Tóth N.(szerk.)(2022). *Roma integráció a gyakorlatban*. Debrecen, Magyarország: Debreceni Egyetem.
- Varga A. (2018). *A rendszerváltás gyermekei*. Pécs: PTE BTK NTI Romológia és Nevelésszociológia Tanszék