

EDUCATIONAL POLICY RESPONSES TO SUPPORT ROMA STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study examines Hungarian educational policy measures implemented between 2015 and 2025 to improve the academic success of Roma students. Education is viewed not only as a means of knowledge transmission but as a key driver of social mobility and equality. Roma students face complex challenges rooted in social disadvantage, cultural differences, and systemic issues such as segregation and institutional discrimination. The paper provides an overview of major interventions, including compulsory early childhood education, the Complex Instruction Programme (CIP), community-based *tanoda* initiatives, the *Útravaló* Scholarship Programme, and Roma Special Colleges. While these programmes have yielded positive local outcomes—such as improved cooperation, reduced dropout rates, and enhanced access to higher education—their long-term impact is limited by underfunding, project-based approaches, and lack of systemic integration. The study adopts a critical perspective, highlighting the need for sustainable strategies, teacher training in inclusive pedagogy, community involvement, and comprehensive monitoring systems. Recommendations include strengthening teacher education, promoting integrated social support, and ensuring Roma participation in decision-making. The findings underscore that only systemic, long-term measures can effectively reduce educational inequalities and foster genuine social inclusion for Roma communities.

Keywords: Roma students, educational policy, social inclusion, segregation, inclusive education

Discipline: Educational Science

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Absztrakt**OKTATÁSPOLITIKAI MEGOLDÁSOK A ROMA DIÁKOK TÁMOGATÁSA CÉLJÁBÓL**

A tanulmányban a 2015 és 2025 között végrehajtott magyaroktatáspolitikai intézkedéseket vizsgálatára kerül sor, amelyek célja a roma tanulók tanulmányi eredményeinek javítása. Az oktatást nem csupán a tudásátadás eszközeként, hanem a társadalmi mobilitás és egyenlőség egyik legfontosabb mozgatórugójaként is tekintik. A roma diákok olyan komplex kihívásokkal szembesülnek, amelyek társadalmi hátrányokból, kulturális különbségekből, illetve olyan rendszerszintű problémákból fakadnak, mint a szegregáció és az intézménydiszkrimináció. A tanulmány áttekintést ad a legfontosabb oktatáspolitikai beavatkozásokról, beleértve a kötelező óvodai nevelést, a komplex oktatási programot (CIP), a közösségi alapú tanoda kezdeményezéseket, az Útravaló ösztöndíjprogramot és a roma szakkollégiumokat. Bár ezek a programok, kezdeményezések pozitív helyi eredményeket hoztak – például javult az együttműködés, csökkent a lemorzsolódás aránya és javult a felsőoktatáshoz való hozzáférés –, hosszú távú hatásukat korlátozza az alulfinanszírozottság, a projektalapú megközelítés és a rendszerszintű integráció hiánya. A tanulmány kritikus szemszögből közelíti meg a kérdést, kiemelve a fenntartható stratégiákat, a pedagógusképzés nyitottságát a probléma iránt, a közösségi részvételt és az átfogó monitoring rendszerek szükségességét. Az ajánlások között szerepel a tanárképzés erősítése, az integrált társadalmi támogatás előmozdítása és a romák döntéshozatalban való részvételének biztosítása. Az eredményekből kiolvasható, hogy csak rendszerszintű, hosszú távú intézkedésekkel lehet hatékonyan csökkenteni az oktatási-egyenlőtlenségeket és elősegíteni a roma közösségek valódi társadalmi befogadását.

Kulcsszavak: roma diákok, oktatáspolitikai, társadalmi befogadás, szegregáció, inkluzív oktatás

Diszciplína: neveléstudomány

Introduction

The academic success of Roma students is crucial for social integration and equal opportunities (Radó, 2020). We firmly believe that education not only conveys knowledge but also promotes social mobility. It has the potential to reduce exclusion and provide disadvantaged groups with opportunities for advancement. A successful educational trajectory shapes individual life paths and has long-term effects on labour market participation, health status, and community engagement (Híves, 2015). Education, therefore, is not merely a means of personal development but also plays a key role at the societal level in reducing structural inequalities (Biczó, 2019). Our experience suggests that the progress of Roma students is influenced by many interrelated factors. From a social perspective, extreme poverty, housing difficulties, and parents'

low levels of education pose significant barriers. These factors not only affect academic performance but also limit access to learning. According to Fehérvári (2015), at the cultural level, differing value systems, language difficulties, and identity conflicts hinder school integration. Cultural differences often lead to misunderstandings, which further deepen students' sense of isolation. From an educational standpoint, segregation, low pedagogical expectations, and the lack of teacher competencies required for inclusive education exacerbate inequalities (Kertesi & Kézdi, 2016). Therefore, preparing and supporting teachers is essential for creating an inclusive educational environment.

Systemic issues are also present, such as institutional discrimination, inadequate funding, and project-based approaches that are often unsustainable (Farkas, 2023). These problems not only

hinder the functioning of educational institutions but also limit the long-term impact of programmes. Due to the lack of sustainability, many initiatives fail to achieve lasting results. The aim of our study is to provide an overview of Hungarian educational policy measures implemented between 2015 and 2025. These measures were intended to improve the academic success of Roma students. Based on academic literature and policy documents, we examine what programmes and strategies were developed. We explore their impact on the educational trajectories of Roma students and the challenges encountered during implementation. Particular attention is paid to how these measures contributed to social integration and to what extent they addressed the real needs of Roma students. The study consists of four main parts. First, we present the educational situation of Roma students and the key challenges they face. Next, we categorise the educational policy measures from early childhood education to higher education. In the third part, we analyse the effects of the programmes. Finally, we adopt a critical approach to formulate recommendations for the future. Our goal is to contribute to the development of an educational policy mindset that is sensitive to social differences and capable of bringing about real, sustainable change.

Context and Challenges

We believe it is essential to understand the factors that influence the academic success of Roma students. Only with such understanding can educational policy measures be applied in a targeted and effective manner. When planning interventions, it is crucial to consider not only the internal workings of the education system but also the social environment of the students. According to Híves (2015), without understanding the territorial and structural correlations of social disadvantage, it is impossible to design effective interventions, as students' attitudes towards school and their performance are closely linked to the quality of their living

environment, family background, and community relations. Research and statistical data from the past ten years—such as the analyses by Tóth (2020)—show that Roma students' opportunities still significantly lag those of their peers from the majority society. According to data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office in 2021, 60.8% of Roma youth left school prematurely. In the general population, this rate was only 12% (Infojegyzet, 2023). This disparity not only calls into question the effectiveness of the education system but also has serious social consequences. Low educational attainment narrows labour market opportunities, reduces the chances of establishing an independent livelihood, and hinders social mobility (Farkas, 2023; Tóth, 2023).

Segregation remains a serious issue. Research by Bihari (2021) indicates that in some regions, the number of segregated schools has not decreased but increased. The spread of so-called “ghetto schools” and the phenomenon of “white flight”—the departure of non-Roma families from ethnically mixed schools—further deepens social divisions. This hinders the integration of Roma students and perpetuates social exclusion in the long term. Segregated educational environments not only diminish the quality of education but also sustain disadvantages over time (Forray, 2022). Our experience shows that many Roma students live in deep poverty, which creates numerous educational barriers. Housing problems, lack of basic infrastructure—such as internet access, heating, or a suitable space for learning—and limited parental support all make school participation more difficult. Students often struggle to engage properly in schoolwork, which can lead to dropout in the long term. This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many Roma children virtually “disappeared” from education because they lacked the tools and conditions necessary for digital learning. This situation highlighted the extent to which digital inequalities affect access to education.

One of the deepest-rooted causes of Roma students' educational disadvantage is systemic anti-Roma bias. According to Kertesi and Kézdi (2016), this bias is present not only in education but also in employment, housing, and healthcare. Prejudices and discriminatory practices hinder the implementation of inclusive education. They often result in low pedagogical expectations, segregated placement, and the undervaluation of Roma students. The principle of equitable education—that every student should have an equal chance of success—is often not realised in practice. Without a shift in mindset, sensitisation of teachers, and the dismantling of social prejudices, the education system cannot become a truly opportunity-creating environment (Radó, 2020).

Educational Policy Measures and Programmes

Over the past ten years, several educational policy measures and programmes have been launched in Hungary with the aim of promoting the academic success of Roma students. These interventions have appeared at various levels – from early childhood education to higher education. According to Farkas (2023), these programmes have sought to address both structural and pedagogical challenges, while also attempting to consider the specific social and cultural circumstances of Roma students. The introduction of compulsory nursery education from the age of three in 2015 was a significant step. It supported early development and school readiness. The goal was to ensure that all children—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—had access to quality early childhood education. Bihari (2021) highlights that this stage is fundamental for the development of language and social skills and lays the foundation for academic success. Participation in early education is especially important for Roma children, as in many cases this is their first encounter with formal learning within an institutional framework.

Several legislative and methodological initiatives have been launched to reduce segregation. A prominent example is the Complex Instruction Programme (CIP), based on a methodology developed at Stanford University. The programme aims to ensure that every student experiences success, regardless of their social background. According to Bihari (2021), CIP is now implemented in more than 150 schools. It reduces status differences, improves cooperation, and enhances academic performance. The programme is particularly effective in heterogeneous classrooms, where students' varying abilities and backgrounds make inclusive pedagogical approaches especially important. After-school programmes known as *tanoda* also play a vital role in supporting Roma students. A *tanoda* is a community-based, extracurricular educational programme in Hungary, primarily aimed at supporting disadvantaged children, especially Roma students. These learning centres offer personalised tutoring, skill development, mentoring, and social activities outside regular school hours. They provide a safe and supportive environment where students can strengthen their academic performance, build self-confidence, and experience positive social interactions. These extracurricular activities not only improve academic outcomes but also aid socialisation. *Tanoda* programmes offer individual development, tutoring, skills enhancement, and community activities. They boost students' self-confidence and motivation (Bihari, 2020). *Tanodák* often provide a safe and supportive environment where students receive affirmation and can develop their abilities.

Based on our own experience, the Neville *Tanoda* in Nagyrábé exemplifies the principles of inclusive education. Its pedagogical practice focuses on personality development, talent nurturing, and equalising opportunities. This demonstrates that civil initiatives can also provide effective and long-term support for Roma students. The involvement of local communities and the use of personalised

development plans have proven particularly successful. The *Útravaló* Scholarship Programme (Government of Hungary, 2005) is another outstanding initiative. The *Útravaló* Scholarship Programme is a Hungarian government initiative designed to support disadvantaged students, including a significant number of Roma youth, throughout their educational journey. The programme offers financial assistance and mentoring from the upper grades of primary school through to university graduation. Its aim is to promote equal opportunities and social mobility by helping students stay in education and achieve academic success. Mentors play a key role by providing both academic guidance and emotional support, tailored to the individual needs of each student. Through several sub-programmes, it supports disadvantaged students, most of whom are Roma. The support extends from the upper grades of primary school all the way to university graduation. The programme provides mentoring and financial assistance to help students progress. Its aim is to make learning a genuine tool for social mobility. The role of mentors is especially important, as they can support students' development and motivation through personal relationships.

Hungary has committed to ensuring equal educational opportunities through the National Social Inclusion Strategy. The European Union's new Roma Strategic Framework (2020–2030) sets out three main educational goals: reducing disparities in early childhood education, decreasing the proportion of children attending segregated schools, and narrowing the gap in upper secondary attainment (Tóth, 2025). These objectives reflect the aspiration to make education truly inclusive and opportunity-enhancing for all children, regardless of their background or social status.

Impacts and Outcomes

We are convinced that evaluating the impact of educational policy programmes is essential. Only

through such assessments can we gain a realistic picture of how effective the measures supporting Roma students truly are. Although many initiatives have been launched over the past decade, the results are mixed. There are promising developments, but systemic issues continue to limit effectiveness. The lack of impact assessments makes it difficult to determine which programmes yield genuine, long-term results and which remain local, short-term interventions.

Compulsory nursery education from the age of three has helped increase Roma children's participation in early development. This is particularly important, as experiences and skills acquired in early childhood fundamentally shape educational trajectories. However, as noted by Bocsi, Varga and Fehérvári (2023), the quality and accessibility of services remain uneven, especially in disadvantaged regions. Significant disparities can be observed in teacher qualifications, institutional resources, and family involvement. Efforts to reduce segregation—especially the Complex Instruction Programme (CIP)—have had positive local effects. Student cooperation has improved, status differences have decreased, and motivation has increased. In our experience, CIP works particularly well in mixed-ability classrooms, where inclusive pedagogy is crucial. The programme's success is partly due to its emphasis on active student participation and the deliberate use of students' strengths by teachers.

Tanoda programmes also play an important role. They help reduce dropout rates and socialisation disadvantages. According to Bihari (2020), *tanoda* activities improve academic performance, boost self-confidence, and support further education. Among participating Roma students, improvements have been observed in both academic achievement and behaviour. The community-building role of *tanodák* is also significant, as in many cases they provide the only supportive learning environment available to children. In the 2024/2025 academic year, the *Útravaló* Scholarship Programme

supported more than ten thousand disadvantaged students, including many Roma youth. Through its four sub-programmes, it assists students from primary school to higher education, offering mentoring and financial support. According to Németh (2009), the programme is most effective when mentoring is personalised and continuous. Among participants, early school leaving has decreased, and more students have attained upper secondary qualifications. Mentors provide not only academic but also emotional support, which is especially important for young people living in difficult circumstances.

Despite these successes, systemic problems—such as segregation, discrimination, and underfunding—continue to hinder broader effectiveness. Tóth (2025) also emphasises that these factors can limit the outcomes of even the most successful programmes. Many initiatives are project-based, time-limited, and rarely become embedded in the education system. This reduces sustainability and long-term impact. Due to the lack of systemic integration, many initiatives fail to achieve the desired social change. The Roma Special College network was launched in 2011 at the initiative of four historic churches. Today, 11 institutions operate, eight of which are church-run and three university-run. These institutions serve as talent development hubs. Their aim is to support Roma and disadvantaged students in successfully participating in higher education and preventing dropout. The colleges offer not only academic support but also community experiences, identity-strengthening programmes, and cultural events.

At least 60% of students in these colleges are of Roma origin. The colleges play an important role in strengthening Roma-Hungarian dual identity and preserving cultural heritage. Teaching the Romani language and promoting cultural diversity are key objectives. The Association of Roma Special Colleges acts as an advocacy organisation, supporting the network's operation and drawing attention to

the low number of Roma graduates and the social significance of the colleges (Biczó, 2021). The example of the special colleges clearly shows that Roma youth's participation in higher education is not only possible but can be successful with adequate support and a strong community background.

Critical Approach

When analysing educational policy measures, we consider a critical perspective essential. It enables a deeper understanding of the programmes and helps uncover structural shortcomings. A critical approach allows us to examine not only the outcomes but also the underlying processes. According to Hüse (2015), the study of Roma students' attitudes towards school can only be meaningful if the effects of the social and institutional environment are considered, along with the hidden mechanisms that shape students' educational experiences. Although many initiatives have been launched to support Roma students, their effectiveness is often limited. This is partly due to systemic issues and partly to the way these programmes are implemented. Most initiatives—such as *tanodák*, scholarships, and methodological developments—operate with project-based funding. This type of financing is time-limited and rarely becomes embedded in the education system. Many programmes lack long-term strategies and do not integrate organically into institutional structures, which hinders sustainable development.

Due to the lack of sustainability, these programmes often have only local and temporary effects. Systemic change is absent, so positive impacts cannot be realised on a broader scale. Another concern is that the effects of many programmes are not examined thoroughly. A unified, nationwide monitoring system is missing, which makes it difficult to compare measures, track results, and provide feedback. Without impact assessments, decision-makers lack sufficient

information to improve or adapt programmes in a well-founded manner. Without this, it is difficult to determine which programmes have truly been effective. Although Roma special colleges play an important role in preserving cultural heritage, there is often a lack of genuine dialogue and interest in Roma culture within the wider society. This limits the impact of these programmes (Varga & Györgyi, 2024). The opportunities offered by the colleges can only generate real social change if society becomes more open to embracing Roma identity and values.

Inclusive education is not only a methodological issue but also a challenge of attitude. In our experience, teacher training often lacks the content and practices needed to address the specific needs of Roma students. Without a shift in mindset—dismantling prejudices and developing cultural sensitivity—the impact of measures remains limited. Teachers play a key role, as they shape students’ school experiences and directly influence the inclusiveness of the educational environment. It is important to highlight that Roma communities are rarely meaningfully involved in the planning and implementation of programmes. This lack of participation reduces trust and results in measures that do not reflect the real needs of Roma students. Without the involvement of those affected, interventions often remain “top-down” solutions (Kántor, 2011), which are unable to bring about genuine, lasting change (Tóth, 2025). Community participation not only increases the effectiveness of programmes but also contributes to social integration and the empowerment of Roma communities.

Recommendations for the Future

We firmly believe that educational policy measures aimed at improving the academic success of Roma students can only be truly effective if they initiate systemic change and become embedded in the education system over the long term. These measures must not only respond to current

challenges but also be capable of shaping institutional culture and pedagogical practice in a lasting way. Based on the findings and challenges discussed in previous chapters, we offer the following recommendations for the future. First and foremost, we consider the strengthening of teacher training and continuing professional development to be of key importance. A stronger emphasis on the principles and methods of inclusive education is essential. Only in this way can teachers respond sensitively and effectively to the diversity of learners. Renewing the content of teacher education and developing the methods used in practical training can help future educators approach the specific needs of Roma students with preparedness and openness. Wider application of methods such as the Complex Instruction Programme may help reduce status differences among students and support the creation of inclusive school environments.

At the same time, we recognise that education alone cannot solve the problems arising from deep poverty. Therefore, an integrated approach is needed, in which educational, social, health and housing services operate in a coordinated manner. Bocsi, Varga and Fehérvári (2023) also emphasise that alongside *tanodák*, mentoring programmes and scholarships, it is important to support families, involve parents, and mobilise local community resources. Community-based approaches, built on the cooperation of local stakeholders, may offer more sustainable and effective solutions in the long term. We believe that the success of Roma students cannot be imagined without the active participation of their communities. It is important that involvement in decision-making, the training and employment of Roma educators, and the strengthening of cultural identity are not merely supplementary elements, but integral parts of interventions. Participation, in this sense, is not only a means but also a goal. Empowering Roma communities through education is key to social integration. Community involvement not only increases the acceptance of

programmes but also ensures that they respond to local needs and real problems.

Finally, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of programmes is indispensable. Indicators and data collection methods are needed that are sensitive to ethnic differences but do not stigmatise. Data-driven decision-making can help ensure that resources are directed where they are most needed. In addition, it is important that evaluation systems do not rely solely on quantitative indicators but also consider the experiences and feedback of students and their families, thereby ensuring the social embeddedness and relevance of the programmes.

Summary

In this study, we presented the educational policy measures in Hungary aimed at improving the academic success of Roma students between 2015 and 2025. We highlighted that education is not merely a system for transmitting knowledge, but one of the most important tools for promoting social mobility and equal opportunities. The progress of Roma students is influenced by a range of interconnected social, cultural, and educational factors, while systemic issues such as segregation, discrimination, and underfunding continue to limit the effectiveness of interventions. We provided a detailed analysis of key programmes, including the Complex Instruction Programme, *tanodák*, the *Útravaló* Scholarship Programme, and Roma special colleges. Through a critical lens, we examined the impacts of these initiatives and offered recommendations for the future, emphasising the importance of improving teacher training, increasing community involvement, and developing feedback and evaluation systems that allow for the monitoring of programme impacts and ensure that support reaches the areas of greatest need. We are convinced that only systemic, long-term sustainable measures can bring about real change in improving the educational opportunities of Roma students.

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