

The integration of Roma minority in Albanian society through education.

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Abstract:

In Albania today, the challenge is being integrated in EU, and one of the main conditions is the integration of minorities in the society.

The main aim of this article is analyzing the correlation between the education of roma minority people in Albania on one hand, and the way this education effects their life and their integration in the society on the other hand. Properly education can realize that Roma people have a normal life, have a job and be paid properly for his work, be active in society, while maintain and cultivate their own culture.

The most important issue today, in the age of globalization, is to get a way, for making different people (of different ethnic, race, believes etc.) live together as equal. This should be the scope of education of minorities in Albania as in the whole world. So the most important question raised in this study is how we should transform education in the way he would be able to make this purpose come true.

A brief summary of related literature review and some empirical results are provided. Data collected from a qualitative research which sample consists of depth interviews of Roma people who have studied and have a certain level of education.

The results indicate that there is no correlation between success in school and financial and social success, concerning this minority. Very few of those who have completed their studies have found appropriate employment. While they attend their studies, they may lose some of the skills that are actually gained from their families, finding themselves double marginalized in the society.

This paper attempts to assess if education of roma people helps them being integrated in the society, what is going wrong in education of minorities in Albania, who are the practices of best interventions at school level in favor of Roma children, what we should change and how these changes can help giving minorities a better life and access in society.

Introduction

The main goal of the Albanian state and society today is the integration into the European Union. One of the main conditions to achieve this integration is the integration of minorities which are in Albania. In the globalization era, the challenge is to make possible for different people (of different ethnicities, races, religions etc.) to live together as equals.

A widespread minority in our country is the Roma minority. Roma minority live in Albania for more than 600 years (Kolsti, 1991). They came from India shortly before the Ottoman conquest in the middle of XV century. There are missing data on the Roma population in Albania. There are only some fragmentary data though often contradictory emerging from some administrative source, various surveys or data that come from projections based on approximate official estimates and on non-governmental Roma associations. In Albania are living around 120 000-150 000 Roma people.

Since the early 80s at the initiative of the Council of Europe and later of the European Commission, the education of Roma minority has been the focus of systematic studies. Socio-economic situation of the Roma minority can change through education. The education for Roma children is a social issue with implications that lie beyond the field of education, and also a community issue with major implications for all people together, not just individually. The purpose of education is to give people tools and means of independence, promoting diversity and respect for different identities is possible only when everyone - especially the identities of minorities-advantage proper means to an active adaptation. Education is a crucial challenge for the Roma minority.

So far, the education for Roma children in Albania has been a failure. Although the exact underlying indicators of education of Roma children in Albania are missing, it is concluded from various studies that enrollment, attendance and quality of education for Roma children in school are low, abandonment rates are high and that only a very small part of Roma children finish the 9-year education system and even fewer, the high school and university. The data collected from interviews show that young Roma who have managed to complete their studies have encountered many difficulties during the years of schooling, most of them have been very difficult to find a secure and convenient job according to their qualifications, only 52% of them are employed and feel themselves integrated into the Albanian society.

This unfavorable situation is a result of the fact that public compulsory education of children in Albania does not respond to the sociological situation of Roma children, they face language barriers, and social, cultural, financial and infrastructural obstacles as well. Their motivation to pursue long years of study is very low. It is first thought, that the best practices for an intervention in order to improve this situation, given the best practices experienced in countries that have had a positive performance in this regard, is that the cultural characteristics of Roma children be one of the active components in the process of education, teachers be trained and Roma parents be involved in the process. Schools should not only accept and understand the experience of Roma: it must be adapted to it by fully respecting it. And secondly, Roma children and parents should be motivated by offering them after-school jobs.

The current situation of education of Roma children in Albania (problems)
After World War II, the Albanian population was largely illiterate. With the establishment of the socialist regime there settled laws that made compulsory education and illiteracy was reduced significantly. But since the events of transition in 1991 levels of education in Albania have declined significantly, too. School attendance dropped, school abandonment increased and illiteracy resumed especially in poor areas. This affected most the Roma community. Since the '90s educational situation of Roma children is significantly deteriorated. From a UNICEF study in 2007 resulted that there are about 5000 Roma children aged 3-16 years old, of which 62% do not attend school and kindergarten, only 13.5% of children aged 3-5 years attend preschool education while only 45.6% of aged 6-16 years currently attend school, 54% of Roma children that are

currently of compulsory school age (9-16 years) have not completed any grade, 43% of Roma children in the age group 15-16 years old are illiterate.

Another problem is that there are large discrepancies between the chronological age of children and classes they attend, so 7.2% of children aged 10 years attend the first class when they should follow the fifth grade, while 8.6% of Roman children aged 14 years attend the eighth grade, whereas as a rule, most children have to finish the eighth grade (Tamo, Karaj, 2007).

This situation is related to a group of problems and obstacles faced by Roma children in our education system, a system which is failing to contribute to the desired extent in the integration of this category of students. Some of the reasons of such a situation are: large poverty (inability to buy books and other school items); malnutrition; ignorance of the language of in which the lesson develops; low achievements in school and the unpleasant feelings that follow the low achievements; low levels of parental demands; low educational expectations of Roma; the quality of teachers working with Roma pupils; discrimination (not applicable to the exclusion of Roma from educational institutions or participating in certain activities neither the creation of separate classes for them, but for situations that arise in classrooms in which it damages the dignity of Roman children due to their lifestyle); low motivation.

Policies related to education of Roma children in Albania

Until 2003, Albania has not had separate policy for the education of the Roma minority. In 2003, the Albanian government approved the national strategy "For improving the living conditions of Roma minority" for the period 2003-2015. In this paper, along with other aspects, there is also in a separate section the policy for the education of the Roma minority. The main objectives in this strategy are focused on the identification and registration of Roma children who should attend kindergarten and school, reconstruction of schools where Roma children learn, training teachers on human and minorities rights, the organization of courses for the elimination of illiteracy, the provision of free textbooks and school items, the organization of after-school activities, the awareness of Roma parents, etc. These objectives are realized only partially. This is because there is a contradiction between the ambitious objectives of

the national strategy and limited institutional capacities, human and financial resources to achieve the objectives.

Another problem that decreases the effectiveness of the strategy is the total failure of its objectives in all areas e.g. the failure in the economic objectives (poverty reduction, shelter) seriously damages efforts to achieve the objectives in the field of education. It is understood that the order of priorities the education occupies the third place after the life security and accommodation (shelter). In Albania the Roma children come from families with extreme poverty and the present strategy addresses this problem only by providing free textbooks, scholarships and courses on the Albanian language, but it would be better that in addition to be offered other provisions in school like meals, clothing, transport and health care.

The current strategy has shown no attention either to prevent failure in class or low results of Roma children in school. It is important that all Roma children be helped to advance in school and facilitate their integration.

Currently the education system in Albania is not sensitive to the needs of the Roma community and does not take them into account (does not include them) in teaching jobs and other activities. Capacity building for minorities themselves to handle their own problems related to education should be the major objective of the strategy for Roma.

Study results

One of the obstacles in Albania today that the education of Roma minority encounters is the low interest of Roma parents and children for education. This low motivation, along with problems and obstacles presented above, may be an important reason of the recent educational situation of Roma children. This study assumes that, among other reasons, the cause of such low motivation is the lack of correlation between success in school of young Roma and financial and social success and suggests that schools should serve as an agent of change.

In this study have been interviewed 13 young Roma who had graduated from high school and higher education, of whom seven boys and five girls. These interviews have been conducted through a network group of Roman Active Albania one of the NGOs working to empower Roma minority.

School years: the long years of schooling for Roma children and young Roma people are highly problematic and difficult. Starting from the first grade and later in other grades Roma children face many difficulties which cause them to lose interest in school and to abandon it. The data show that 67% of interviewees admit that years of schooling have been very difficult for them and have often thought to abandon it. Most of them (71%) rank poverty as the greatest difficulty faced, mentioning the inability to be equipped with books and school items, to have appropriate clothing and health care. Others recognize that parents have asked to leave school in order to work, and to help their family with economic income.

Another difficulty that it is also mentioned during the interviews is the prejudice and discrimination by teachers and classmates. 80% of them indicate that they felt prejudiced and discriminated at school. They claim (47%) that they often felt offended about the color of their skin from classmates, located at the end of class, were less engaged by the teachers, etc. What stands out from the analysis of the data is that respondents who have completed high school education are more inclined to emphasize the difficulties encountered in school than those who have graduated from university. When some of the young Romans with higher education were asked about this fact, they admitted encountering more prejudices in 8-year schools and high schools than at university. Thus, a Roma girl who had graduated from the Faculty of Natural Sciences said "I have encountered the biggest difficulties especially in 8-year school and high school, less at university."

Employment: Youth Roma commented that their education is not associated with those benefits of the non Roman youth. They do the same jobs as the other illiterate young Roma. It seems that the Roma do not distinguish the impact of education in solving their problems because their school and after school experiences are not very positive. The data collected show no correlation between level of education of Roman youth and success in the finance and society. Very few of them, which continued through the long years, difficult and often unhappy ones at school have come out from there to work safe and appropriate to their levels of qualification. On the other hand, being educated has also created problems for them, because while attending school lose abilities to learn within the family and stumble to put to use their formal education.

Only 55% of young Roma interviewed have managed to find a job after school, of which 87% said that the workplace they currently possess is not suitable to their educational qualification. Jobs which are possessed by the youth who participated in this study are not what these young people hoped for while they were facing the big challenges of education, 69% of them had thought that would have worked in positions proper to the profession for which they had been qualified. Only about 46% of young people think that the payment of their work is sufficient, 35% think their salary is less satisfactory and 19% say it is not at all satisfactory.

Integration into society: Being educated helps young Roma to adapt to the environment surrounding them although in most cases they come from school without finding their roots with the inability to find a help in the world of job. Among the interviewees, 89% said that education has affected their way of living, 60% feel that their life has changed for good while others (about 40%) feel that their life has changed for a lot better due to the education they received. Nevertheless, the majority of the young interviewed people have not managed to settle down in a safe workplace, they do not deny that education was the right choice and 97% of them admit that education has made plainer their relationship with young non-Roma people. They feel more involved in the Albanian society in comparison with their Roma peers, and much more appreciated by a large part of people who they come into contact with. Asked if they feel integrated into the Albanian society, 81% of young Roma responded positively. The fact that they have managed to position themselves into jobs according to their level of education does not prevent them to contribute to volunteer work at non-governmental organizations to strengthen the Roma minority. They say that they work to make aware about the importance of Roma education for their children.

Based on the data, there should be recognized that long-term benefits of education for Roma are unclear. Roma parents will continue to choose the immediate benefit that brings the work of their children compared with education as long as employment opportunities will be limited to them.

What should be done?

The situation of every community in terms of school should be seen in long-term historical context and against the backdrop of current policies. For centuries the Roma culture is denied and the school has served for a long time as a tool for the forced

assimilation. In this context they see school as a hostile institution and as an official part that draws towards assimilation. Communities among which live Roma people should not require them to be enforced the way they do not want, nor to reject those methods or tools that they wish to acquire. Finding the right balance here is very difficult.

Education has become a crucial challenge. Illiteracy does not serve any more to protect people or to make them independent. Circumstances that make the difference in their lives, especially their social life and at work, require that Roma adapt actively and fairly quickly, in order to continue their life as Roma and in doing so they put to use tools provided by education. In an increasing number of jobs, the traditional jobs as well, today are required individuals who have a certain level of education.

The involvement of families in the education process is essential. Roma parents are willing to send their children to school but they are reluctant because they think that the school will distract them from their culture. What Roma parents expect to find are school teachers, not educators, they want their children to get qualifications at school to make certain types of jobs and not delegate their duties as educators. Therefore the content of what is taught in schools must change.

The school needs to make cultural characteristics of the Roma children one of the active components in the process of education. This means first accepting all intellectual and physical skills that children learn in their own environment. Roma children can not make two parallel social and cultural lives by overcoming the one to the other every time they pass the door of the school. Their characteristics should be the basis for the learning process. It should be understood that the accession of Roma experience in school and its use as a source, means that there should be taken into account everything that happens outside the school in different areas of life which form the personality of the child to determine his behavior.

Roma children in the class are aware of their being distinguished by others from the form and content, between the education they receive in school and education within the family. The language used in school is not native; it has a different conception of time and lifestyle. Games played are different and develop the type skills not valued in school. (Pierre Liégeois, 2007) Roma encourage their children with a strong sense of reality, independent spirit, the capacity to build strategies for survival, the sense of the pace of relocation, these achievements which society surrounding them doesn't take

into consideration and occupy very little place in school. The consequences of this situation are serious as Roma children become immediately penalized and refrained because the kinds of behavior they learn, which are useful in the world of family, are stigmatized and harmed by the school. The school should not only accept and understand the experience of Roma: it must be adapted to it being fully respected.

The presence of Roma culture in school includes its presence in the eyes of non-Roma children and thus becomes a good tool to suppress prejudice. Presentation of culture in school means that it gets assessed and taught, it supports the argument that Roma represent a cultural minority and not a social category, and this has important consequences both in the educational approach and psychological one.

Another area which must be necessary to intervene in order to improve education for Roma children is that of teacher training and providing information for teachers, supervising teachers' employment and educational/school mediators of Roma communities and producing quality teachers adapted to the needs of students. Among other things should be paid importance to the employment Roma youth after school, in order to feel motivated to take advantage of the schools in order to take the necessary things required for independence.

Of course this article does not assume the provision of all solutions to the issues of education of Roma minority. This work has its values but is still limited, it can not answer all questions related to this issue.

Conclusion

The school is a product of society but society also to some extent is the product of the school and this means that there are reasons for gradual development, as the specific changes in the content of what is given to learn, combined with specific changes in school structures, lead to changes in attitudes and in the spread of new solutions. Schools should be a cultural agent because it exerts a great influence on the overall process of raising children. Schools must meet the needs of all stakeholders involved in the process through an agreement between various parties involved in terms of basic goals. It is expected of school to give students the tools to make it worth their culture, it is a tool to accomplish various purposes related to the personal balanced

development of the individual, professional training, adapting to society and cultural development.

Teachers should be trained in order to be flexible to different groups of children regarding the content of what is taught, practice and materials used should be determined by the behavior of the children, classrooms must be adapted to the needs of children and education be in combination with education in the family.

The aim of such a school that includes in its curriculum different student cultures, race, ethnicity, different religions, aims to give children an enriched experience and enhance mutual understanding between them, through learning experiences together and informed about their different cultural backgrounds.

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