Chapter 3

Segregated Schools, “Slow Minds” and “Must Be Done Jobs”: Experiences About Formal Education and Labour Market in a Roma Community in Romania

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Abstract Based on a long-term ethnographic fieldwork, this study applies the cultural-ecological theory to understand reasons for making and maintaining a segregated school in a Romanian town, and those community forces which track and maintain Roma children there. As findings indicate, creating and sustaining such an institution reflects the flip sides of Romanian national policies, which due to the financing strategies and centralized curricula—involuntarily—block the chances to provide quality education to marginal groups. Tracking and staying of Roma children into such schools is a result of their parents’ ambivalent experiences with formal economic activities and formal education. Experiences with work and schooling shared by this urban group of Roma reveal that parents have clear expectations towards school: transmission of practical knowledge, good treatment and isolation of the school problems from family life, which not always can be fulfilled by the educational units.

Keywords Roma school · Educational inequalities · Cultural ecological theory · Romania

Introduction

School segregation is a core issue in the scholarship on Eastern European Roma educational inequalities (for relevant literature see Messing 2017). Academic and policy accounts define this process as the making and reinforcement of those institutions, where—intentionally or not—Roma pupils are physically separated from their non-Roma peers (Rostas and Kostka 2014, p. 272), the proportion of Roma children exceeds 20%, truancy and school abandon is high, educational

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achievement of the students very low and the institution has bad fame (Rekosh and Sleeper 2004).

Despite many great researches focus on the institutional factors responsible for making segregated educational units (Rostas and Kostka 2014; Rostas 2012; Feischmidt 2013), little do we know about the (Roma) community—, (Roma) parents’—, (Roma) families’—experiences that unwillingly track and maintain children in these schools. However there are only a few investigations on the relation between education and macro-social factors (Szalai 2010), researches on labor market and school segregation from an emic point of view are even less.

This study intends to account the above-mentioned issue. Based on a long-time ethnographic fieldwork, it investigates experiences about work and formal education shared by parents and grandparents from a Roma community, whose children attend a segregated school. In doing so we try to identify the commonly shared practices and beliefs, which are unwillingly responsible for making and remaking educational inequalities in this group¹ through the lenses of anthropology, a framework rarely used in educational studies in Romania (Anderson-Lewitt 2012). For an anthropological approach, such practices and beliefs of the parents are seen as coping strategies of a marginalized community (Tauber and Zinn 2015). From this perspective Roma groups are not perceived as passive, hope- and helpless victims of blind social forces, but active agents, who—despite of extremely hard social and cultural pressure—remain masters of their lives (Kovai 2017; Horváth 2010).

Focusing Outside the School: Ogbu and Its Critics

Cultural ecological theories coined by John Ogbu (Ogbu 1981; Ogbu and Simmons 1998; Fordham 1988) were chosen as an explanatory framework for this investigation. According to this approach there could be sizable differences between certain minority groups and the dominant society regarding school performance, and these differences are not standalone classifications—they are brought about as a result of the treatment of minority groups in society, which may be reflected in school. Thus, certain individual and community-based perceptions of schooling and education may occur, which may influence and/or determine school behaviour (Ogbu and

¹For earlier versions of this study see: Plainer, Zs. (2017) “This Is How I Abandoned School and Began Selling Sunflower Seeds”. Work Experiences, Living Conditions, and Relations to Formal Education of Roma Families in a Romanian Town. In Roth, K., Benovska, M. (2017). *Balkan Life Courses. Part I. Ethnologia Balkanica*, 20. pp.33–44. For community history see: Plainer, Zs. (2018). “Everybody Loved Each Other There”. Roma Memories of the One-Time Cinka Panna Colony in Oradea and Its Liquidation during the Communist Times. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*. XX/10, (pp. 1–24). For institutional background see: Plainer, Zs. (2013). Audit Culture and the Making of a ‘Gypsy School’ Financing Policies, Curricula, Testing and Educational Inequalities in a Romanian Town. *Philobiblon—Transylvanian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Humanities*, 2013/2.

Simmons 1998; Ogbu 2003). According to this framework, school is linked with other sociocultural institutions (family, larger community) and the broader field of economy. Community forces (group relations, family) are influencing school success and failure: in this dimension, patterns of employment/unemployment, economic and social positions, social mobility, and the role of schooling within the family should be investigated (Ogbu 1981). The connection between school and the broader society is revealed in this model through the definition of schooling, which provides credentials for young adults to enter the labour market (Ogbu 1981), as: Schooling is a culturally institutionalized device for rewarding individuals with society's status system. And the most significant content of the status system is one's job (Ogbu 1981).

Based on such definition, this model pleads for a multilevel analysis based, on the one hand, on the analysis of the school and, on the other hand, on a macro-perspective, which intends to link formal education to the broader economy structure and the parents' economic and social opportunities. In doing so, Ogbu assumes that children and parents belonging to low-status ethno-racial minorities use adaptive strategies at school, and these strategies strongly influence their educational outcomes (Ogbu 1981; Fordham 1988).

According to this model, such an analysis has to grasp (at least) two important dimensions: the system and the community forces in order to see, how these two influence cultural patterns of education. Analyzing the system implies how these minorities are treated (mistreated) in education through educational policies, including all sorts of discriminations in and outside the school, which sometimes are directly reflected in the classroom or the educational establishment. On the other hand, the so-called community forces have to be researched, covering the range of formal positions on the labour market, conditions of living, and access to different resources. Community forces should pay attention to beliefs about the value and role of schooling, the degree of trust between the clients and the institutions, as well as the symbolic beliefs in education and the way it enforces positions on the labour market as well as the way it contributes to minority identity (Fordham 1988).

Having in mind all the critics addressed to Ogbu for his deterministic and holistic way of defining culture (Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein 2012) I will reject to label culturally mediated patterns on education as “typical for the Roma”, as I do not see them as manifestations of a “Roma culture”. Even though the culturally mediated practices on school and work result from commonly shared experiences not independent from the global social history of the Romanian Roma, I consider them as ones typical for a group of people, who refer to itself as “Gypsies” and who may have more in common with local non-Roma, living in the same social environment, than with Roma from different sub-ethnic groups and economic conditions from the country.

The Research Itself: The Community Itself

My Roma interlocutors (over 90% of the interviewee) refer to themselves as “Hungarian Gypsies”, this label denoting a group of Roma, who consider themselves as part of the local Hungarian society long ago. The old ones, born in the 1950s speak Romany without being able to identify their dialect, or the sub-ethnic group they belong to. The language was not transmitted to the younger ones, where the generation of parents understand Romany but are not able to speak, meanwhile the children, who are now teenagers, do not even understand it as the first language in the family is Hungarian. Children are enrolled in classes with Hungarian language, they all consider themselves eligible for the benefits accorded by the Hungarian state to those who learn in Hungarian language (*oktatási támogatás* in Hungarian).

The community lived on the eastern fringes of a Romanian city in a Roma-only colony, which was dismantled in the 1970s in line with the communist policies of urbanization (Bárány 2000; Achim 2004). Colony members were relocated from their self-made adobe houses into two neighboring blocks of flats, which gradually turned into an urban ghetto. The better-off Roma moved out from the blocks in the 1980s, before the degradation of the place, so they live now in separate houses in the area, among non-Roma neighbors; the poor ones still live in the ghetto. A third category never moved in the blocks, instead they tried to seek a house elsewhere in the area. This study deals with that fraction of the group, which live outside the ghetto, together with three families, who still live in the area. It is so, as my research unit was not the shanty town, but the school these children attend.

Many (half) of these people are economically marginal (living on social allowances, child-benefits, etc.), and are only temporary employed. Another half has permanent jobs, the women work as cleaning persons or semi skilled workers/employees in sewing factories in the town, men are hired in constructions; a great number of persons are migrants. Their children—in many cases—are brought up by the grandparents, usually the grandmothers, as the parents (the mothers) are working abroad, sending money back home.

The school which many of the Roma children attend, is located from a 15 to 20 min’ walk from the urban ghetto. It is not the only one in the area, as another one is located in the proximity (roughly 15–20 min walk, either) but on the opposite direction. Majority of the children attend this latter, meanwhile a few of them, were enrolled in the first one, together with other Roma children, who live outside of this neighborhood. The school has Romanian and Hungarian classes,² the presence of the Roma children being over 80%. There is a foundation in the neighborhood, established and run by the Reformed (Hungarian) Church, which—in strong collaboration with the school—provides hot meal and after school programme (for free) for the Hungarian school children. Another foundation run by the Orthodox (Romanian) Church is in the neighborhood, having the same services for the children in Romanian classes.

²Romanian and Hungarian refer to the language of the education.

Data collection started in 2011, and had three main dimensions. The first one—based on interviews with the actual and previously active school staff—meant to shape the institutional processes which lead to the making of segregated school. In this phase a series of interviews were conducted with headmasters, school teachers and the auxiliary staff: psychologist, psycho-pedagogue and the Roma school mediator. The second dimension of the research consisted of interviews with the parents, and other Roma or non-Roma, who witnessed the changes of the 1970s and 1980s, the forced relocation of the Roma community during communism; this layer intends to outline the local history. The third layer focused exclusively on the parents and grandparents, whom I visited regularly, mainly after the end of each school year. These interviews were made for two reasons: to identify how personal and family experiences are related to the broader cultural patterns and the institutional setting of the school. Secondly, these interviews tried to document the changes in school performance, school experiences and the changes of parent’s living conditions in the previous 12 months.

Although class ethnography was part of this project, its findings are not as complex as to be presented here.

Systemic Issues: The (re)Making of a Ghetto School

The school with elementary (0–4) and secondary (5–8) classes is a state founded one, as the majority of the Romanian educational institutions. Likewise others, it has a low level of autonomy in elaborating a curriculum (suitable for the needs of socially disadvantaged children), in financing, in hiring teachers, in establishing the number of the classes the institution needs. These all have to be “approved” by the county-based inspectorates and the Ministry of Education. Recently, the local council has more and more influence on material decisions: it decides the number of new classes and the number of children and the school staff the school can enroll.

School segregation here is not just an effect of the white-flight (leaving of non-Roma children into better institutions) (Rostas 2012), it is also reinforced by the embeddedness of national policies of education (Neumann 2016; Toma 2011). As financing of schools in Romania depends on the number of enrolled students (state allowances are established per capita), in a shortage of children the previous headmaster voluntarily gathered all those who were not “wanted” by other education units. Simultaneously, the school hired a mediator³ who was seriously involved in recruitment. She visited all the parents, who could have children of school age, and convinced them to enroll in the institution. This process seemed to be extremely helpful for two reasons: the school mediator was member of the one-time colony,

³In the climate of EU adherence, Romania applied the transnational model of Roma mediator in many schools. According with the initial definition, these persons coming from the Roma community are employed to facilitate communication between the school and the group (Rus 2006).

being a ghetto dweller for a short time, thus she was a credible person in the eyes of the community; besides she took over from the parents (who felt lost in the labyrinth of bureaucracy) all the administrative work necessary for enrollment. This process gradually turned to be a self-acting one: the parents and grandparents enrolled their children in the school about which other community members had a good opinion. They strongly demark this school from the other segregated one in the area, where—as they say—majority of the children are “blockers” (in Hungarian: “blokkosok”: i.e. block dwellers), which means “they are up to no good” at school.

Unlike the ideal type of a segregated school (Duminică and Ivasiuc 2010; Surdu 2012), this one is more or less equipped and most of the school staff is qualified and dedicated, this may explain why abandon rate is low, only truancy is high. Still, as I have previously mentioned, the school has no possibilities to invent and adopt a curricula based on the necessities of the children, meanwhile the nationally designed one does not fit the real needs (as it was worked out for middle-class condition, supposing that all children were attending kindergarten, all have books at home, all have conditions to do their home works etc.). The industrious work of the elementary school teachers to help children acquire basic skills is not recognized and rewarded even within the professional community. Material reward is not possible, as the state does not recognize such performance, and almost every teacher on the same professional level is paid equally, regardless of his/her efforts. But symbolical reward of the colleagues is missing, too:

Yesterday we had our compulsory, regularly organized meeting, were all teachers in the town are invited. Its topic was outdoor activities. My colleagues from better, downtown schools, presented their marvelous outdoor programmes like taking their children to trips in Hungary. My achievement was to take my class to the puppetry. After I finished my presentation, the colleagues looked at me sorrowfully, saying: ‘yes, you have no possibilities to work properly’. They did not realize, that for many of my children this was the first and probably the only occasion to see a puppet show. (interview with a form teacher)

Community Forces

Work and Attitudes Towards Works

In this section I intend to take stock on work types these Roma men and women performed and the values and beliefs attached to them.

Majority of the colony dwellers were economically independent in the 1970s and 1980s. Women were selling feather and used clothes or sunflower seeds in the city. Men were doing trade with horse, many worked as carriers with horse and a cart, transporting and processing wood in the city, others were involved in gambling. Both men and women did informal trade with goods smuggled from Hungary and Serbia, which—purchased from the black market or through informal networks—were highly valued commodities in the economy of shortage of Ceaușescu’s Romania. Roma were also working in public sanitation or performed day work at a neighboring company which processed fruits. These two were workplaces “which

hired Gypsies and we knew that”—as many Roma remember. Some men and women were industrial workers permanently employed by the neighboring factories.

The next generation (born in the 1970s or later) was leaving school at an early age. They helped their parents either in informal trade (scrap iron, selling coffee, gold, sunflower seeds, transporting and processing wood etc.) or—the girls in housework and child caring. It was so, as they were too young to be hired as unskilled workers. Nowadays many of them do the same (informal trade with goods, selling clothes, collecting scrap iron), or work in small factories in light industry (shoemaking, sewing), men are generally hired in constructions; majority of the Roma have only temporary jobs.

Attitudes towards different types of work are relatively similar among the community members. However benefits of industrial work during communism was acknowledged even by those researchers, who were skeptical to socialist types of modernization (Stewart 1993) these type of jobs were seen very critically by majority of community members. It was only one person, who recalls with pride those years in the factory, when was promoted from an unskilled worker to a semi-skilled one; all his working years he was accepted by his non-Roma colleagues. Others consider industrial work as “tiring”, “dirty”, “demanding as we had to work in three shifts”. There is a common belief that such work is dangerous to one’s health: “my husband was working in the factory but he got ill”; “mum was working in the plant, but she died as she had to breathe the smell of toxic materials”. More than that, many of the younger generation saw their parents, who were forced to go in a sick pension, and died before reaching retirement age, leaving their children with no material security at all. This might be a reason why such a carrier path was not transmitted as successful from one generation to another: “It was out of question for me to go and work in a factory. I had seen my parents, who got ill.”

Present day encounters with the formal employment are equally negative. The experiences below are shared not only by Roma, but all the non-Roma, who have been employed almost their entire lives and faced similar conditions:

When my sister worked in the shoe-factory, she arranged me a place here, at the Italian owner. She told to her boss that I am OK, I do anything I am asked for. But I do not liked it, as it is a dirty work and glue smells. You do not feel it anymore, as you get accustomed, but I feel like dizzying ... This is a good job, I mean it is a should-be-done job (in Hungarian: muszáj munka). I would leave it if I could but others told me, other places are worse. It is like a prison in here. I must not talk, I have to register with my card whenever I go to the loo. I always feel like living in a prison. But the bosses are not OK, they pursue you as much as you cannot stand it. You have to make 700 pairs [of shoes] but they force you to make 500 in two hours. You cannot sit down, not even for a while. And they shout at you, which is something I cannot stand. (Roma woman, about 40)

And these workplaces do not recognize one’s educational attainment:

Of course I do regret not attending a vocational school and having only 8 classes. But, on the other hand it would not help me too much. My colleagues are working next to me with baccalaureate. They have reached exactly where I am now. As education matters only of the employer takes it into account. (Roma woman about 50)

Besides, Roma narratives show, that this section of the labour market is much harder to reach for Roma than to the non-Roma:

I was refused in the shoe-factory. I could not lie, as they asked me about my schools, and my eight classes were not enough. But there was a Hungarian girl there, who told me, she was hired, although she had less. I was told to come back in a week as they have no work. [. . .]. This is what usually happens. Everything is all right on the phone but when they see you, they reply: we have no vacancies anymore. (the same narrative)

Informal work, especially collecting waste and scrap iron, as well as doing small trade with goods purchased from the Serbian and Hungarian black market, remained a major occupation either for men or for women even after the collapse of communism.

When I was 18 [in 1990] I was buying and selling, and I liked it. 10 lei, 25 lei, 100 lei which was big money in those times. And it was all mine. My sister went to school and I could bought her anything I wanted to. I went to Hungary and bought things, clothes, better than those in Romania. And I could buy food there. I had my guide, L., who was transporting Hungarian tourists, and called me when they reached the border. Then I get on the bus and did the business. It was so, as L. appreciated me very much. But we were abused by the police many times. My mother was beaten. So I thought I should find a job. (Roma woman, 50)

The meaning of doing informal trade (being economically independent, earning one's living by making up networks with the non-Roma) became a common value since the colony life. As the settlement was located in the proximity of the timber yard and oil factory, the Roma could purchase wood and oil and resell it to non-Roma in the town. But this possibility was only for "the trustworthy" as they say. So informal trade was a sign of prestige and acceptance. Besides, as they recall, purchasing commodities from the black market, helped them to improve their living conditions:

I wanted to leave out from the block, so went to the office. Gave coffee and some gold to the public servants and they arranged me to get an allocation for a better apartment. (Roma man, 60)

Doing work from a very early age was not loafing one's time. Helping the carriers during the 1970s, carrying fruits and vegetables for the vendors on the market were useful activities by which one provided material sustaining for the family.

I left school after four classes and helped on the market. I brought home some money and gave some stuff. I was happy to help my mother, who was bringing us up by her own. (Roma man, 25).

School and Attitudes Towards School

The most salient aspect when analyzing narratives about school is the contrast between its normative value (schooling is good) and the experiences that lay behind. In line with other empirical data (Surdu 2011) all my respondents consider schooling

important and—as a first reply—they recall positive memories about that. But, as the following fragment reveals, the years spent in formal education were rather ambivalent:

‘Were you attending school?’

‘Yes, there was a school in the colony, close to our house. I had only four classes but I knew much more than one with twelve years of schooling, as I knew writing and reading, because the parents and the teachers looked after us.’

‘But you told you have only four classes?’

‘Because I was a repetent, and sent to another [remedial] school, where we spent all the week. We were eating there and sleeping there and we were took to the zoo and for a walk. It was good. I tell you, how I reached there. I did not want to go to school, so my father sent us to this new one. The teacher agreed as we finally learn reading and writing there—she said. We spent one year there but then mom kept crying and persued my father to bring us back and she did not want to be without us. And we stayed at home. Anyway we had a lot to do there: look after the children, feed the pigs, do housework.’ (Roma woman, 60)

However the fragment raises a series a questions and problems (see later), only one is pointed out in this subsection: the negative experiences with formal education. A great majority of my respondents associate school with compulsion and pressure. Some say it was difficult to stay in the same room each day, some recall the police, who forced children and parents to attend school regularly. Other recall that “they were not helped” in school and many name teachers who applied physical force in the classroom.

School and Knowledge Transmission

Narratives on educational experiences indicate very clearly what sort of knowledge is expected to be acquired through formal education: “I quit from school as I was able to read and write”, “I want to send my children to school. I want them to know how to read and write not be remain stupid.”

The practical knowledge which should be transmitted by school has its meaning in outside the institution and is considered a symbolical advantage in economic activities:

We were doing business (in Hungarian: csencseltünk). Went to Vinga, near the Serbian border to bring soap and sweets, which were rare in those times. I was eleven and helped my uncle to look after the staff. They took me, as they I knew I can count very well, no one can fox us. I was like a calculator. (Roma man, 50)

And a school, which helps to acquire such knowledge becomes credible:

I learned how to count very early, as my father forced me. After my first school day he asked me how much is 3 X 3. I did not know, so he became angry, and I became sad. But there was a teacher in the school, who asked me what happened. When I told her, she stayed with me after hours and taught me how to count. I went back home and said: now I can do that. (fragment from the same interview)

Reasons for Attending and Leaving School: The Good and Bad Students

Most common reason for abandoning school is the lack of school success. It is noteworthy that parents and grandparents, who “were quick learners”, share pleasant experiences with school (however they left it early), in contrast with those, who were not endowed with this: “the teacher explained me a lot but I still could not see what this is about”. These children do not regret abandoning, and they were not forced by parents to stay. They had “a slow mind” (in Hungarian: *nem fog a feje*) as the Roma most frequently explain: “I had a slow mind, so my parents did not force me to go to school.” “Having slow mind” is most important reasoning when a family decides who should continue education and who can leave school among the siblings: the quick learners stay, the slow minded ones leave the institution. But being endowed with the natural skill of quick learning was not just a guarantee of a higher level of education but a source of school success and acceptance and support by the school staff, too:

I left school because nobody cared for us.

(her sister): You are nonsense. Everybody cared for us. I liked to be there, my teacher, I learned everything and the teachers liked me and cared about me. There was one, Enikő, I remember her name, who wanted me to continue and do high school. She said she arranged a place for me but I quit after the 8th form. It was because I was a quick learner and everybody loved me. You should not say, you were not helped. You were but you could not do that, that is it! (two Roma sisters of 40 and 50 years)

This pattern of the good student occurs not only in the memories of the parents but—identically—in teacher’s experiences with their children: “My older son was doing well at school. The teacher came home to us and said, he is ok, he is doing well”. Or: “the math teacher asked, who is good with Mats in my family, because my daughter can count anything.”

“Bad students” are the ones “with problems”: not attending school regularly, “being lousy”, and “being a basher” according to the school staff. In a few cases these portraits reflect the widely shared categories of cultural racism (Modood and Werbner 1997); “They said they were going for cycling. But later the girl told me, they stole a bicycle and were forced by the police to return it. This is what they called ‘cycling’. It tells a lot about their world.”

On the other hand parents expect the school to solve problems of discipline: “I don’t understand why the teacher called upon me? She said my child was uncivilized. This is something she should solve in the school.”

A Good School

Narratives on formal education trace out the main features a “good school” should have. Each parent spontaneously mentioned the foundation (ruled by the Reformed

Church) when speaking about education: "there is the foundation, where my kid goes. They spend there the afternoon, make the homework and get some hot meal. So, when he comes home everything is done." This request cannot be fulfilled by the school, as the state does not provide resources to start an afterschool programme: money and the necessary conditions for preparing and serving food (certificates from the authorities etc.). The so called "better schools" with a pool of middle class students, introduce afterschool programs with the material support of parents, which in this case is not possible. Parents "associate this with the school although we have no resources to provide this. If the foundation is closed, the school will have to loose"—according to the headmasters.

When speaking of insufficiencies, parents mention the physical distance (from school to home) as a main barrier of sending the child regularly, especially when the older siblings attend a high school elsewhere in the town, and the younger ones cannot be left by their own in the morning. Others consider a merit of the school that it claims no material contributions from the parents: "My son has a nice teacher. She asked us no money still she we celebrated mother's day at school."

Attachment to the form teachers is a frequent topic in the discussion. Roma parents and children underpin that "they are good", "they take care of the children". It was a common narrative when children were in the 0–4 classes, having only one teacher, who stayed with them all day long, including the breaks. Almost everybody missed this personal attention and carrying after the fifth class, when form teachers were replaced by five or six colleagues.

The Meaning of Education

A few interviews were conducted with those, who continued school after graduating 8 classes. They—and their family—consider education a worthy thing, which has symbolical advantages:

My daughter is now in a vocational school, my son finishes the second class now, he is 10. But I told them firmly that as long as I live, school should be continued. And the 12 classes should be finished to get a baccalaureate. And the university. My son says he is going to be an electrician, as he wants to make big money. No, you cannot be rich with studies but people look you differently. (Roma man, 40).

The only person with postgraduate studies I met during the research explains this endeavor as follows:

I remember when I was defending my thesis at the university. Everybody treated me with respect. The last question I got, was to tell what is the Romany for bread. Fortunately I knew the word as we do not speak Romany at home. And after I finished, some university teachers came to me and said that I should be very proud of myself as I am example for my nation. [...] I work now as a masseur, as I earn much more with this, but still, am so proud. (Roma woman, 25)

Conclusions

In line with cultural ecological theory, two dimensions were identified to be responsible for educational inequalities of a Roma community from Romania: systemic ones, responsible for making and sustaining a segregated school, and the community forces which track and maintain children there. Findings clearly show, that reasons for creating and sustaining it are more complex than a fear for losing one's job (Vidra and Feischmidt 2010).

Maintaining segregation reflects the flipside of the national system of financing, where allocation is up to the number of children enrolled. Incapacity to provide quality education (through elaborating an adequate curricula), to guarantee the permanency of the teaching staff (by material and symbolic incentives) result from centralisation of the Romanian educational policies, too.

Work experiences of two generations of Roma reveal that participation on the formal labour market is rarely a story of success. Narratives underpin that the socialist project of modernization, which aimed to facilitate upward mobility to the Roma by integrating them into working class, was not pattern worthy to be transmitted from one generation to another. Taking permanent jobs in the mid 2000s has—to many in this group—similar outcomes. Feeling physically controlled and forced to produce much over the assigned quantities, are not only unpleasant individual experiences but they reveal how—after the collapse of the socialist industry—Romania became a supplier of cheap workforce for western and south western companies. Moreover, due to the surrounding climate of racism, to many Roma is very difficult to reach even these fringes of the formal labour market (Vincze et al. 2019).

Economically independent but informal and sometimes half legal or illegal activities (like trading with smuggled foreign goods) seem to be a more successful economic strategy, even though its flipside is now visible: pauperization, living on allowances etc. It is so, as these convey a certain status to the performer (capacity to trade, to make up a network, to establish contacts with the Roma, instead of being subordinated to them). And this successful path needs no formal educational performance and credentials: they can be acquired through personal experience through face-to-face interactions within the family.

Although many respondents agree with the importance of education, schooling is associated to negative and ambivalent experiences, where only a natural gift, that of a quick learner, (which means to be a good student) can bring some recognition.

The good school in the narratives is more complex than a place where no child is racially discriminated. Thus, the affirmation about staying in ghetto schools because the protection they provide against racism (Messing 2014; Zentai 2011) is but one aspect. It is so, as Roma-only schools cannot entirely protect children from racial classifications: these discern students of the same origin into “good Roma” and “bad Gypsies” (Dunajeva 2017), the latter being embodied by the block dweller childrens in the investigated community. As the interviews reveal, sticking to a segregated school has more complex reasons: the geographical proximity of the institution,

credibility of the school mediator, whom they can turn to if any problem occurs, the emotional attachment to the teachers, especially to the form teachers in 0–4 classes is a very important factor to stay. Traits of a good school are also grasped through the narratives: providing food, helping with homework, mediating the conflicts “to have everything there: food, home works and all of this”. But schools have rarely material possibilities to fulfill such requests.

Experiences and beliefs of the educated community members highlighted that schooling is not seen as a source for educational mobility. It is rather a way of symbolical recognition by the non-Roma, a possibility to erase the racial stigma. This also indicates that successful policies of inclusion should not only plead for ceasing physical separation; these should fulfill expectations of each Roma community towards formal education, too.

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