



# **Gypsy Children in the Schools**

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The following foils illustrate the number, the proportion, the identity, the self-denomination, the language, the history and the aims of the European gypsies. The situation in Hungary is a bit less complicated since the half a million extremely heterogeneous population has got an acknowledged language, they are not evenly spread and the undertaking of their own identity is also different. Unfortunately their disadvantageous situation at the labour market, in the educational system, in health care, etc. is the same except for a few cases. The situation is relatively disadvantageous, since any Hungarian gypsy family would happily change with a disadvantageous Dutch or Swedish gypsy. Gypsies looking for work continuously immigrate from the neighbouring countries legally and illegally which shows that the disadvantageous situation refers only in comparison with the majority of the Hungarian society.

The number of the Hungarian gypsy population is about sixhundred-thousand that is about six % of the population of the country. The mother tongue for three quarter of them is Hungarian (romungro), for one fifth it is romani, some per cent speaks beas (archaic roman dialect). Independent of the mother tongue each group has both rich and poor sub-groups but most of them are under the poverty level of the Hungarian society. They all settled after the II. World War latest and have got permanent living places. They got employed in industry and agriculture. From sixties the gypsy children generally went to school. This process was stopped by the political and economic changes of the regime in nineties.

Today more than half of the gypsy children live in families where there is no employed adult, since more than two third of the adults became unemployed. The gypsy children are in disadvantageous situation concerning almost everything, from living conditions to eating. Their bad results at school are widely known. Lot of them did not finish their primary school studies, the entry to the secondary school is in the low level, while the country average is high. The school subjects and the educational methods do not fit the values and attitude of the gypsy families. The families often expect less from the school than usual: they expect teaching, according to their standards it is the family that is responsible for educating. The gypsy children of even the well-to-do families do not prepare their homework for the following day. They are not given help in their studies at home, they have no separate room, or table to work, shelf to keep their school equipment. They go to school without breakfast, elevenses, they often suffer from hunger. They are often late, they often miss classes, since they have to take care of their smaller brothers and sisters.

The school is unable to solve all the problems of the gypsies. The pedagogues cannot help a lot either. The primary schools often use the various forms of segregation in the 90-ies as well. Sometimes the gypsy pupils are separated from the others because of public hygiene reasons. The most typical way of segregation that the gypsy children are directed to the so called special classes for slightly mentally handicapped children. It means that the children of the most disadvantageous situation are separated from their age-group, are taken out of the average system of public education. The program of "closing up" can turn to the contrary among these circumstances.

### **The relationship of the gypsies and the schools**

Most of our schools have got everyday experience about the problems of the gypsies. The directorate of the school has got a great influence on the atmosphere to emphasise co-operation. First it has to be understood that in spite of their internal heterogeneity the gypsies have got traditional cultural values. The directorate of the school has to work out methods based not only on school performance but also on understanding the cultural "difference". During the past few decades there have been significant steps made in the schooling of the gypsy children. That is why today the central question is not how illiteracy can be defeated (however the problem still exists) but the faster increase of the level of their schooling, the support of school success for children and teenagers and the stoppage of the trend of our decade.

The development is not questioned by the painful fact that the underfulfilment of the gypsy generations is relatively increasing compared to the majority. The number and proportion of gypsy children at school is fewer and fewer in each class and it is especially true for the upper classes and the secondary schools while the non-gypsy pupils finish primary school almost without exception and study on in secondary schools. It is an important task of our school to help the progress of the gypsy pupils. To achieve this there is a great need for knowledge, skills, that help to increase school results and to achieve a peaceful coexistence of the ethnic groups. The question is especially actual now that the families can choose the school they want and it can result schools having almost exclusively gypsy children. The school director has got an important role in forming the co-operation between the given school and the local gypsies.

### **The background of failures at school**

Most of the gypsy pupils suffer from such a failure at the very beginning of their school studies that they drop out. The failures are expressed in their deficiency in studies but the sensitivity, the lack of ability to tolerate failures are also important in case of the gypsy children. There are two factors that increase each other and form the background of failure in studies.

- The failure is a consequence of the lack of skills and knowledge that were not realised during the previous studies. The knowledge, or rather the lack of knowledge can be very different, from history to mathematics, from chemistry to spelling. The failures can be realised and corrected by intensive training of coaching character. The formation of habits how to learn is a more difficult task, it is essential to increase the motivation because of the difficulties in the learning process. From this point of view the gypsy children are similar to other disadvantageous children: they should be taught how to learn.

- The other group of background factors is psychological, social-psychological. The secondary schooling seems to be rare among the gypsies today (except for a few elite groups of professionals). The secondary school student gets far from the community not only in the geographical sense but also socially. No wonder the gypsy communities try to protect their members and keep them within the community sometimes because they do not want to lose their most talented members. The young one choosing to study in secondary school has to face the question (sometimes

consciously, sometimes unconsciously): one might lose one's community if one accepts the danger of assimilation.

- The connection between the two groups of factors is that the need for assimilation - or its danger -, often decrease the motivation of the children for studying, they have to face the question whether it is worth studying and pay a high price for it by losing the family or the ethnic community perhaps. Within the ethnic group there is little chance for choice, for integration. They also have to consider what happens if they fail in assimilating and become losers in every respect. In other words it means that many gypsy communities do not appreciate knowledge and they do not feel it useful in the society. The hidden or open anti-gypsy mentality of some schools increase the feeling of danger, the seclusion and it causes a vicious cycle. The frustration increases and the personality is damaged in a multiple way. Any attempt that wants to protect the studies of gypsy children by supplementing the knowledge, the skills obtained at school, is unsuccessful. It is also not enough to take part in trainings, camps where they are helped by informing them about their original culture and help them understand it. It has only got an indirect effect on their performance at school. The effective support of studies can only be arranged by the support of school studies and the recognition of their ethnic culture at the same time.

### **Gypsy pupils in schools**

The gypsy pupil who is more defenceless than the average, especially need the above described attitude. There is also a need for a better knowledge of their culture and a sincere interest for the efficient training of the gypsy pupils. We do not know the gypsies well enough. The pedagogues are afraid of having many gypsy pupils because they do not know them. The gypsies are also afraid, they are distrustful, they fear of everything. It is not so difficult with them. Their call, their kindness must not be rejected.

In some schools it is a problem that in the groups of gypsies that are more bound to traditions the family means the large family and this large family reacts the real and alleged grievances of the majority society with unusual sensitivity. If they experience any grievances they join forces and want the situation to be corrected. The gypsies' right to determine the role of the family and that of the child in the family must not be doubted. The school on the other hand has to form the locally valid forms of contact that results an optimal relationship; it has to be formed together with them.

### **The most important things are:**

- openness, sincerity, respect of many children with different attitude
- interest and knowledge on the culture of the local gypsies
- the teacher has to be initiative
- the family often means large family (opposite the Hungarian families)
- the gypsy families worry about their children too much that has to be respected
- the school and the family (community) have to form the rules of contacts together

### **Sources of conflict**

We just list a few sources of conflict without completeness. If we can solve them, the relationship between the school and the gypsy pupils will be less problematic, there would be more chances for success. The solution of the conflict means mutual concession.

- two-three day absence from school - It can have different reasons like family holidays (wedding, funeral, christening, etc.), the parents travel away, pig killing, harvest, fair, etc. The school has to accept the motivation of the absence depending on the occasion or type.

- getting undressed for a PE lesson, at the doctors - In many gypsy communities prudishness is stronger than we are used to, it reminds us of the traditional peasant culture. It is valid not only for girls but also for boys. We have to find the way, the rules that do not hurt sensitivity (e.g. let them take part in the P.E. lesson in track suits).

- avoiding out of school activities - One of the reasons can be the solicitude for the child: the family accepts that the children are safe within the walls of the school but is afraid that the teachers cannot take good care of them "outdoors". If we cannot convince the parents the children are safe we would rather give them exemption.

- conflicts of ethnic character - It happens especially in the atmosphere of mutual distrust that average conflicts between teacher and pupil, pupil and pupil are considered ethnic. These conflicts have their history, their process, they have to be stopped before they become of ethnic character.

- report book notes - Try to avoid written messages, unfortunately parents are often illiterate or functionally illiterate. The teachers' handwriting often cannot be read even if it was written with printed capital letters.

- praise and result - If there is any possibility, the child's performance, behaviour, appearance, manners have to be praised. It has to be taken into consideration that the family perhaps will not be able to understand the difference between general praise and school marks. It has to be emphasised if the praise is not given for the school result.

The too early marriage is a conflict which is not easy to handle. We have to know that the age of getting married increases among the gypsies as well. There is still an opinion among pedagogues that the too early marriage is a consequence of early sexual maturity or of downfall - living together without getting married. They do not know that the reason is that the given community (culture) considers the young ones to be ready to have a family sooner. It is not a biological specification (inherited, "racial") but a characteristic feature of the society. The school cannot do anything against early marriage - founding a family -, in the short run. The increase of the evaluation of the school can bring a result on the long run.

The treatment of the conflict can be easier if there are employees from the gypsy ethnic group among the teachers, the staff who could mediate between the school and the gypsy community.

### **Conduct in the school**

According to many the endeavour for finishing school is motivated by the need for obtaining the certificate; it is necessary for further studies, for learning a trade, but the

main attraction is that it is needed for obtaining a licence. It is perhaps an exaggeration but it is worth taking care of this motivation because it can be an important factor especially among teenage boys. The motivation for the girls refers to those trades that are tempting for them because they used to be originally household activities like family care, housework, activities around the house. These are of little value at the labour market though. The family often supports the obtaining of a vocational certificate since there are often duties for the children in the family, to take care of smaller children which is a typical girls' job.

It can be experienced that the smaller ones are less frequently absent from school, not more often than their classmates. It is an important result because in many gypsy communities the parents' generation had to be "taken" to school by force, punishment. 12-13 year olds go to school irregularly and they are often not interested in the school and it becomes a problem that spoils the school results. For the gypsy children - as well as for other minorities that live among traditional communities, where the European type of schooling does not play an important role - the children become estranged from school at this age.

There is a traditional attitude to boys and girls in the family: the girl is educated for the family the boy is educated for the world. The girls are educated to be mothers, they are restricted in their going out, their personality, their abilities remain hidden. The boys are educated free, to be independent quite early, to make money. In the gypsy communities that preserve the traditions the differences in behaviour concerning age and sex are greater.

### **The effect of family education on the behaviour at school**

In spite of the internal heterogeneity of the gypsies the style of family education and its result is similar:

- the small children are kind, jolly, helpful;
- there are very similar attitudes to preserve traditions and from early teenage years the child is considered old enough to undertake responsibility in family matters;
- the internal and external social attitude of the ethnic group is mutual that is why the growing child is learnt to realise danger, to be ready for protection, and as a consequence it also increases aggressively.

According to many people it is mostly the lack of sense of duty which is responsible for the fact that the gypsy pupils are less successful at school than expected. This is supplemented by the factors of living conditions and the traditional determination. The sense of duty can be well developed at this age but it refers to family, to mutual family work, to the upkeep of the family and not to the school. For the ethnic minorities the family is very often the only place that serves the positive self-esteem and its strengthening. In such groups the women's function is to be a mother, a housewife, and her cohesive function has to be emphasised; this attitude is justified by the future threat, assimilation in a paradox way.

As a consequence of the conservation of the traditional family conditions the boys soon become macho which is described by many teachers as looseness, aggressively,

play the gallant. It is supplemented by the fact that the members of the minority group are under-estimated by the society - e.g. little chance is given for the advance in the society. A very important factor of men's identity became uncertain, namely that they are strong. In many cases men react to this by aggressively against the physically weaker ones.

The family atmosphere is very warm in the gypsy families and the children have got a strong feeling of safety. The most important possibility for improving the coordination with the gypsy families and children would be to form a warm atmosphere full of feelings at school. There should be more possibilities for establishing the proper atmosphere (more opportunities to meet the family at school). The children have to be accepted as they are, their sensitivity should not be hurt especially in young teenage years when they need more care, more protection and a more expressive expression of liking that have to be guaranteed. The children that are used to the warm family atmosphere want the school to offer them the same. Because of their ethnic sensitivity the teacher is right if he/she accepts and respects their feelings and strive for increasing the feeling of safety in the pupils.

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