

# Mentoring programmes for disadvantaged children in selected European countries

ANDREA ÓHIDY<sup>1\*</sup> , NADINE COMES<sup>1</sup>  and NORBERT PIKULA<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Educational Sciences, University of Education Freiburg, Kunzenweg 21, 79117, Freiburg KG5-213, Germany

<sup>2</sup> University of Krakow, Podchorążych 2, 30-084 Kraków, Polen, Poland

## THEMATIC ARTICLE

Published online: October 22, 2020

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### ABSTRACT

‘Education for all’ and widening access to education with the aim of creating more social equality are long-term goals of the European education policy. Although there was an education expansion in the last decades in most of European countries, educational attainment and achievement still reflect social inequalities: students with less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds are still significantly underrepresented in higher educational institutions and need supporting measures for educational success. Roma students in particular suffer from multiple deprivation: Firstly, because a large part of the Roma population lives in poverty. Secondly, because their different cultural traditions often lead to discrimination in school education. Roma women additionally suffer from social injustice and deprivation because of the gender aspect: the traditional Roma culture defines the place of women to be with the family at home and an educational career is not necessary for that. Mentoring programmes are considered as successful in helping disadvantaged pupils and students to achieve better results in education. A special form of mentoring programmes is often included as a part of teacher education with the goal of not only helping disadvantaged children but also preparing future teachers to cope with diversity in schools. This article introduces practical and conceptual issues regarding mentoring programmes for disadvantaged children focussing on two perspectives: on the impact on the mentees – disadvantaged children with special regard to Roma students, and on the effect on the mentors – students in teacher training.

### KEYWORDS

Mentoring programmes, disadvantaged children, Europe

\* Corresponding author. E-mail: andrea.ohidy@ph-freiburg.de

## DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN IN THE EUROPEAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

‘Education for all’, and therefore widening access to education with the aim of creating more social equality, is a long-term goal of the European education policy. In the last decades there has been an educational expansion in most European countries and today more young people participate in education than ever before (EUROSTAT, 2019). The number of students who successfully participate in higher education has increased significantly as well (EUROSTAT, 2018). However, educational attainment and achievement still reflect social inequalities: Pupils and students with less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (non-academic background or working-class) are still significantly underrepresented at all levels of the educational system and they often need special support to be successful in education (Óhidy, 2018).

According to the definition of the European Commission, disadvantaged children are, those who ‘grow up in poverty, [are] more likely to suffer from social exclusion and health problems in the future, and are also less likely to develop to their full potential later in life’ (European Commission, 2013, 1). National and international data – e.g. Strand (2008), Bohonnek et al. (2010), Koucký, Bartušek, and Kovařovic (2010), Walker et al. (2011), and Sammons et al. (2011) – has shown that social inequality affects people not only from a very early age, but has long-term consequences on their lives and education careers as well (Guerin, 2013, 2). Children from a less socially advantaged background typically attend schools with no direct path towards achieving a higher education entrance qualification, hence they usually do not participate in higher education. The reason for that is not only the selectivity of the educational system but also a negative self-selection of the affected students, who usually have little trust in their own abilities and school performance. They also have a stronger interest in earning money immediately after school and think less often that their parents would and should financially support their studies in comparison to students from an academic background. With these self-selection strategies students from socially underprivileged backgrounds denounce the labour market advantages of a higher education qualification and thereby help to cement their own social and economic disadvantages (Preiseldörfer, 2008).

Socio-economic background seems to be a very important influencing factor regarding access to, as well as attainment and success in education (OECD, 2001). ‘Family status and income remain consistently strong indicators of later success at school, with academic success being correlated with social class, parental qualifications, income and other factors’ (Guerin, 2013, 3). All European countries have multiple disadvantaged groups with educational deprivation, such as children of migrants and of the Roma minority (European Commission, 2019).

## A MULTIPLE DISADVANTAGED LEARNING GROUP: ROMA CHILDREN IN THE EUROPEAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Pupils and students from the Roma minority can be seen as a multiple disadvantaged social group (EU-FRA, 2014b; Óhidy & Forray, 2019, 2020). Although most of the Roma groups have been living for centuries in Europe, their situation is still different from the non-Roma population; they have suffered more often from poverty and exclusion in regard to health and quality of life, on the labour market and also in education. This disadvantaged social situation of the European Roma minority is considered to be a result of their low level of participation and



success in education, which negatively affects their employment and income prospects. It also affects their prospects on the housing market and their health status. These problems have an impeding impact on their access to, as well as attainment and success in education: According to empirical data Roma people are the most underrepresented group in schools and other educational institutions in Europe (EU-FRA, 2012, 2014a; European Commission, 2004).

Roma pupils and students suffer from multiple deprivation: Firstly, because lot of them have a disadvantaged socio-economic background and live in poverty. Secondly, because their different cultural traditions often lead to discrimination in school education. Antiziganism can be seen as a part of European history (Agarin, 2014; Kóczé & Rövid, 2017), which is rarely taken into consideration in public discussion or in school education. Roma women additionally suffer from social injustice and deprivation because of the gender aspect: the traditional Roma culture defines the place of women to be with the family at home and an educational career is not necessary for that. Roma are not only disadvantaged but also segregated in education in most European countries. The most serious form of segregation is that Roma children are sent to schools for the mentally disadvantaged, without any intellectual shortcomings, but because of strong cultural prejudice among decision-makers (Amnesty International and the European Roma Rights Centre, 2017).

The ‘vicious circle of poverty and marginalization’ (Rosinský, 2019, 195) negatively affects the lives of not only Roma children but all disadvantaged children in and outside of schools. Therefore one of the main objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy is to change this situation, to break this ‘cycle of disadvantage’ (European Commission, 2013, 1) and to help disadvantaged children – among them children from the Roma minority – to participate in education and lifelong learning.

## MENTORING IN EDUCATION

Mentoring programmes are considered successful measures in helping disadvantaged pupils and students to achieve better results in education. Mentors can be described as advocates and friends, who are often older than their mentees and can become valuable advisors to them (Perzmaier & Sonnenberg, 2013, 22f). Therefore they can build a close relationship based on mutuality, trust and empathy, which can become a basis of beneficial social-emotional, cognitive and identity development of the mentees (Rhodes, 2005): Mentors have the potential to positively influence the *social-emotional development* of mentees through providing support and a ‘corrective experience’ for pupils and students who have experienced unsatisfactory relationships with adults, e. g. parents or teachers. They also might be able to challenge negative views that the mentees may hold of themselves (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2012, 62). Mentoring relationships can also have a positive impact on their *cognitive developmental processes*, especially regarding the social aspects of learning such as communication, interaction, as well as reception and thinking skills (ibid) furthermore there can be a productive effect on the identity development of mentees: Mentors can help them to create positive ideas and visions about their current and future identities, opening doors to possibilities, activities, resources and educational opportunities – such as higher educational aspirations – from which they can draw to construct their sense of identity (ibid). There are two basic forms to building a relationship between mentor and mentee: Mentees can choose their own mentors or mentors are made available as contact persons of institutions. Teachers and students in teacher education belong to



the second group. There is another important factor regarding the situation of children of migrants and from the Roma minority, which can make a relevant difference for the relationship of trust between mentor and mentee: the question, whether the mentors are from the majority society or part of the (migrant or Roma) community (Hofmann & Óhidy, 2018). Unfortunately most European countries have fewer teachers with a migrant or Roma background than without, meaning that their positive impact as role models and especially trustworthy mentors can't be used very often (e. g. Migration Policy Group, 2014).

The educational system – according to Helmut Fend's theory on the societal functions of schools (Fend, 1980, 2006) – plays a central role in supporting or impeding social mobility. It can help to improve the social position of disadvantaged children, but Bourdieu & Passeron state that it usually only creates an 'illusion of equal opportunity' for them while reinforcing their deprivation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971). Teachers act as gatekeepers in the educational system, allowing or forbidding access to different school levels with the help of evaluations, assessments and tests (Heinz, 1992). Because of their gate-keeper-position they can be very useful mentors for pupils and students in schools. Mentors in education intend to support the mentees' learning as well as their personal development. A special form of mentoring programmes is a part of teacher education with the goal to not only to help disadvantaged children but also to prepare future teachers to cope with diversity in schools.

## HELPING DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

The main goal of mentoring programmes is to help disadvantaged children to achieve better results and higher degrees in education. In this special issue *Diana Antoci, Valentina Mislitchi & Maria Diacon* and *Aranka Varga, Fanni Trendl and Kitty Deli* describe Moldavian and Hungarian mentoring programmes, which aim to help disadvantaged students. The Moldavian project aims to combat pre-adolescent and adolescent violent behaviour and to develop peaceful coping strategies for children by creating mentoring relationships between at-risks youth and persons experienced in teaching and education, such as teachers and managers. The program is based on enriching the professional and personal development of the mentees. Mentor and mentee are built up in a relationship which focusses on ensuring social integration at the workplace by developing professional knowledge and personal skills. The Hungarian programme at the University of Pécs supports disadvantaged Roma students in higher education developing their positive psychological capital. The disadvantage which participating Roma students have experienced consists of the lack of different forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) as according to the theory of (Bourdieu, 1983). The study describes how students could overcome these difficulties and develop resilience and inclusivity. The study analyses life-path-interviews where students were questioned on their external and internal sources of resilience. The results lead afterwards to improve personal and community empowerment of the Roma Student College members.

## IMPACT ON STUDENTS IN TEACHER TRAINING

Another important goal of mentoring programmes – beside helping disadvantaged children to achieve better results in education – is to prepare future teachers to cope with diversity in



schools. *Christina Heise & Friederike Heinzl*; *Brigitte Kottmann & Catania Pieper*; *Hildegard Wenzler-Cremer* and *Teréz Jenei & Judit Kerülő* describe in their articles in this special issue German and Hungarian **mentoring programmes in teacher training**, which not only aim to help disadvantaged children in school education but also to develop the professional skills of future teachers.

*Christina Heise & Friederike Heinzl* present two Mentoring projects conducted at the German University of Kassel, within the action PRONET, a government funded bundle of different projects in the field of educational research. They are part of the nationwide research initiative ‘Qualitätsoffensive Lehrerbildung’ (Quality offensive for teacher training), which aims at improving teachers’ education with regard to inclusion by continuous evaluation of the projects. The analysed mentoring projects had the goal of promoting students’ inclusive attitude by stimulating their reflective and cooperative skills and by raising their awareness for habitus-sensibility. In the evaluated projects (‘ProjektK’ and ‘Kultur Kids Nordstadt’), students take on a sponsorship for a child during a university year. The projects are constantly cooperating with family counselling centres and schools in the city of Kassel. Students meet their sponsored child every week for joint activities. In that way, the children are introduced to social and cultural participation. Students get the opportunity to progress in their professionalisation process by dealing with different aspects of heterogeneity and reflecting on their experiences in university seminars.

*Brigitte Kottmann & Catania Pieper* present the project ‘Schule für alle’ (‘Schools for All’) from the German University of Bielefeld. Student teachers support a child in disadvantaged school or life situations for one year whilst receiving continuous academic guidance ([Kottmann, 2007, 2014](#)). The accompanying research focuses on the professionalisation processes of student teachers during university practical phases. A pre-post survey to evaluate the professional perception of the competence of the students was established. As a result of regular reflection on their practical experiences in seminar courses, students felt supported in perceiving and reflecting their expectations and knowledge for their professional process due to participation in the project.

In her article *Hildegard Wenzler-Cremer* provides insights into the evaluation of the programme ‘Mentor Migration SALAM-Spielen-Austauschen-Lernen-Achtsam-Miteinander’ (Playing-Sharing-Learning-Attentively-Together) of the German University of Education Freiburg. Students studying to become teachers and students studying Social education, mentor children from an immigrant or a refugee family for a period of 9 months. The students gain a better awareness for intercultural encounters, they get insights into milieus they would usually not know or have access to. Students and children build a tandem in a one-to-one relationship in which both participate in planning, discussing and exploring activities. Disadvantaged children can widen their horizon by exploring new places and areas of their city, getting to know the mentor’s life or discover new activities. Students can use their pedagogic skills early in their professionalisation process and to relate their experiences in supervision to theoretic aspects.

*Teréz Jenei & Judit Kerülő* ask the question: ‘Is it possible to diminish preconceptions?’ In other words: What is the positive impact of mentoring programmes on students in teacher training? They present the changes in the attitudes of students who were participating in an international programme of the Hungarian University of Nyíregyháza helping in early childhood socialisation. A special aim of this programme was to diminish preconceptions of students



taking part in educational training regarding Roma children. Prejudice towards Roma is quite strong among students in Eastern Hungary (Kerülő & Jenei, 2016). Most of them overestimate their numbers, and in their wording there is a strong correlation between the categories of 'Roma' and 'problematic' children (Fellegi & Ligeti, 2007). Their initiation into the programme has confronted these preconceptions when they phrased their fears by asking the typical questions like 'Why is it us who have to go?', 'Why do we have to go there?', 'What sense does it make to go there?'. But the evaluation of the programme confirmed that students have gained insights from meeting Roma children and adults. They learnt more about the Roma and worked together with them. According to the participants, the most important impact of the programme was overcoming of their fears concerning Roma, and the change of their opinions regarding them. The programme also helped the participating students to understand relations between poverty and disadvantaged situations and showed them the effects and mechanisms of segregation. The research results of Jenei and Kerülő convincingly demonstrated that students gladly face professionally well-built and laid-out challenges even if these incorporate meeting with social groups towards which they have negative preconceptions. The analysed programme was fit for changing these negative stereotypes.

## CONCLUSIONS

Mentoring programmes for disadvantaged children are important measures in (and outside of) Europe for achieving the goal of 'education for all' and creating more equal opportunities in education. The projects described in this issue show that mentoring can provide **huge benefits in socio-emotional, cognitive and identity development of the mentees but also of the mentors**. Through their special position in educational institutions as gate-keepers **teachers can become very important door openers for disadvantaged children**. They can help them to cope with problems without using violence and develop a positive attitude towards themselves by 'collecting' positive psychological capital. Mentoring programmes in teacher training might **help to prepare future teachers to cope with diversity in inclusive school forms** by providing them with intercultural encounters, insights into milieus they would usually not know or have access to and through raising their awareness for habitus-sensibility. These experiences can help to diminish negative preconceptions and prejudices regarding disadvantaged children and to **develop an inclusive attitude by stimulating reflective and cooperative skills**.

*Ethics:* The study procedures were carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

*Funding sources:* No financial support was received for this study.

*Authors' contribution:* All authors had full access to all data in the study and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis. AÓ: study concept and design, analysis and interpretation of data. NC: analysis and interpretation of data, study supervision. NP: analysis and interpretation of data.

*Conflict of interest:* The authors declare no conflict of interest' or name if there are any conflicts of interest.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No additional acknowledgement.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrea Óhidy (Germany) Dipl. Päd. Dr. phil. habil., is professor and head of the Institute of Education Sciences at the University of Education in Freiburg. Her research interests include educational policy in the European Union, Lifelong Learning, Teacher Training and Pedagogic Professionalism. She has published in these areas in German, Hungarian and English. Contact e-mail address: andrea.ohidy@ph-freiburg.de

Nadine Comes is a research assistant at University of Education in Freiburg/Germany. She received her MA in Sciences of Education from Humboldt University Berlin /Germany in which she worked on negative experiences in German and French as Second Language in the young childhood. She is a member of the department for teacher education. Her main scientific interests are located in the diversity of classrooms and schools with specific view to multilingualism of the pupils.

Norbert G. Pikula is a professor pedagogy and professor social work at Pedagogical University of Krakow, Department of Social Sciences; Doctor Honoris Causa The Tiraspol State University of Moldova (2017). Director of the Institute of Social Affairs, a scholarship holder of the Canadian Government, He did research internships at the Universities of Toronto and Ottawa. His main research interests include in pedagogy, gerontology and social policy. His main research theses are: the perception of the meaning of life among older adults, their quality of life, the labor market and the state policy towards seniors.

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