

BOOK REVIEW

Ohidy, A., & Forray K. R. (2019). *Lifelong learning and the roma minority in central and eastern europe.* Published by Emerald Publishing Ltd. (ISBN: 978-1-83867-260-7).

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Published online: October 28, 2020

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“Preparation depends on the individual, but opportunity depends on society. That is why the government has a role in creating an equal-opportunity society, in which everyone has a fair chance to succeed.”

– Dr. Paul TP Wong

Lifelong Learning and the Roma Minority in Central and Eastern Europe examines the educational opportunities of the Roma population in eight different countries in this region: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The book presents a collection of essays describing the social situation of the Roma minority by reviewing their numbers, groups, names, legal status, culture and languages. The essays also provide an overview of each country’s education system and the educational attainment of Roma youth in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schools. While this anthology focuses on the Central and Eastern European countries, a second book titled *Lifelong Learning and the Roma Minority in Western and Southern Europe* and edited by the same authors discusses the situation in many more countries and it was published earlier this year (Forray & Ohidy, 2019).

The value of this publication lies in its novelty of approaching Roma education from a perspective of lifelong learning as it sincerely opens a window to learn about each country’s struggle towards socio-economic and educational advancement of the Roma minority. The editors of this compilation are both experienced scholars in the field of education sciences. Prof. Dr. Katalin R. Forray is a professor emerita and a Doctor of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences who has been one of the pioneer researchers in social pedagogy with over 450 academic publications. She is also the founder of the Department of Romani Studies and the Doctoral School of Education at the University of Pécs, Hungary. The other editor is Dr. habil Andrea Ohidy, a Hungarian-born academic who currently heads the Institute of Education Sciences at the

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University of Education in Freiburg. She has published several papers on European lifelong learning policies, the education of Roma/Gypsy women, and on cooperative learning methods. All of the authors of this book are academics lecturing and researching at various universities in their respective countries.

In the introduction of this book, the editors give a concise literature review of the social disadvantages linked to the educational outcome of Roma. They reflect upon lifelong learning as a significant educational paradigm in the European Union, noting the impact of the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015) and the European Commission's Roma Task Force, as well as other programs that emphasize the need for more effective measures for Roma inclusion (Forray & Ohidy, 2019). The EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 has recognized that there have been some improvements in the field of education (unlike in the areas of employment, healthcare, housing and discrimination). However, we need to urge policy makers to set goals that reach beyond "Ensuring that all Roma children complete at least primary school" (European Commission, 2014) because that it would be a vital precondition for social mobility and the integration of Roma into the region's labor market.

In chapter 1, Hofmann concentrates on the post-war turning points of Roma bottom-up movements and emphasizes the important work of mentors and mediators within the Roma communities who not only boost educational achievements for thousands but also act as catalysts for new empowering narratives for Roma to promote their socio-cultural visibility (2019, pp. 15–24). The Roma Education Fund alone reached 6,754 beneficiaries in 16 countries in 2019 from pre-school to tertiary scholarship students, and reviewed hundreds of textbooks to reveal the absence or misrepresentations of the Roma minority (see online interactive REF, 2019 Annual Report). As for the top-down EU approaches aiming at developing strategies with specific Roma integration goals, the author is calling for a regional, systematic, cross-sector coordination which would integrate the lessons learnt from prior bureaucratic obstacles for a more successful implementation of the Roma Integration 2020 initiative (Hofmann, 2019, p. 22).

In chapter 2, the author analyzes the current situation of the Roma minority in the Bulgarian education system. Milena Ivova Ilieva provides an overview of this minority representing 8–10% of the country's population, delving into statistical data and reasons for the low educational level of Roma in Bulgaria because of factors such as poverty, other economic problems, socio-cultural attitudes, and systemic issues in the public education system (2019, pp. 27–49). Lastly, the author reviews the different policy measures for Roma integration into mainstream education, looking at constitutional rights, legal aspects, and several laws related to minority education and inclusion, concluding that the Bulgarian governmental initiatives are generally not effective enough and still failing at supporting the needs of the Roma community. To improve the situation, Ilieva recommends additional harmonization, monitoring, assessment, kindergarten access, school preparation, parental involvement, perseverance, multicultural curricular development and updated legal requirements related to the grade promotion policy for Roma students.

The Roma minority in the Croatian education system is analyzed in chapter 3. Goran Lapat and Renata Miljevic-Ridicki provide an overview of this minority officially representing less than 0.5% of the country's population, though the Council of Europe estimates this number to be 2–3 times higher as many Roma attempt to conceal their ethnicity due to fear of persecution, forced segregation and discrimination (2019, pp. 49–69.) The authors highlight the need for improving the visibility of Roma languages with bilingual Romani-Croatian dictionaries, Romani language days, and books in Romani, and they also stress that there is a major social gap between Roma



and the majority of the population, which is especially visible in the education system. Roma students struggle to integrate into the Croatian education system at all levels (preschool, elementary, secondary and university). Roma students rarely attend high school, and only 5% of Roma parents in Croatia expect their children to attend university. Despite these troubling numbers, there are several policy and support programs which have improved the educational, economic, health and social status of the Roma population, such as the University of Zagreb's Teacher Education classes designed to visit Roma settlements to understand their living conditions and interact with the Roma population in a genuine way. The classes assist future educators in developing socio-emotional competence and breaking down stereotypes they may have about Roma students.

Chapter 4 turns its attention to the Roma minority's experience in the Czech Republic education system. After the authors give an overview of Roma representing less than 2.5% of the Czech population, Marketa Levinska, Dana Bitternova and David Doubek argue that despite a booming economy and relative low unemployment rate in the past decade in Czech Republic, Roma citizens struggle to find work because the majority considers Roma individuals lazy with poor working habits (2019, pp. 71–95). Low educational attainment among the Roma contributes to limited opportunities for gainful employment. Roma also experience frequent discrimination in housing and healthcare. Despite free mandated preschool education starting in 2017, roughly one-third of Roma students attend primary schools designed for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Statistics are limited for Roma students in secondary schools and universities, though recently there have been several promising educational initiatives targeting Roma students in social work, with some programs being offered in the Romani language. For many years the Ministry of Education and several NGOs have provided support programs for disadvantaged Roma students at secondary, art and vocational schools. Despite these improvements, research shows that teachers and school representatives still perceive Roma as problematic, which leads to difficulties and systemic discrimination.

Chapter 5 by Juliana Boros and Eszter Gergye explores the educational opportunities of the Roma population in Hungary. While data is not available for the percentage of the population that Roma comprise, the authors state that this minority group is one of the most at risk because of poverty and social exclusion. The authors provide an overview of the three linguistic groups of Roma in Hungary (Romungro, Vlah and Boyash) as well their geographical location (rural, North-East and South-West regions), housing options (poor living conditions) and employment situation (high unemployment) (2019, pp. 97–114). One issue with data collection on Roma in Hungary is that it often does not factor in the heterogeneity of the three categories, instead grouping them homogeneously, which is problematic because the Romungro typically display higher academic achievement than the other two groups. As a whole, around 50% of Roma in Hungary attend secondary school, however, graduation rates are extremely low. The number of Roma who hold college and university degrees in Hungary is statistically insignificant. Despite these daunting numbers, there have been several promising initiatives supporting the development and success of Roma in schools, including extracurricular activities (Tanoda), credit-recovery programs for Roma students who have dropped out ("Second Chance" institutions), minority high schools for gifted Roma students (Ghandi High School in Pecs, Hungary), a foundation for talented Roma youth (the "Invisible College" of Romaveritas), and university departments specializing in Roma studies (Romani Studies and Wlisllocki Henrik Roma Student College at the University of Pécs).

The Roma minority's treatment in the education system of Moldova is studied in chapter 6. According to the most recent official statistics, Roma make up less than 0.5% of the population



in this country. However, the author Maria Diacon states that this figure may not be accurate and the number could be closer to 7% (2019, pp. 115–134). The rates of housing deprivation are higher for Roma in Moldova than non-Roma, with 90% of their households living without piped water and flushing toilets. Only 23% of Roma are covered by medical insurance. Diacon also examines illiteracy, education levels, school dropout rates, causes of school truancy and the availability of educational institutions for Roma students. More than 20% of Roma are considered illiterate compared to 2% for the non-Roma population, and only 4% of Roma in Moldova attain education beyond secondary school. In order to improve these numbers, there are several policies and support programs in place offering assistance to the Roma population in five areas: education and science, culture, health and social protection, jobs and the labor market, and public law enforcement training. Additionally, as Moldova continues its European integration to meet EU standards even though it's not a member state, the country is addressing its social exclusion issues as it relates to marginalized groups like the Roma minority.

The integration of the Roma minority into the Polish education system is the focus of chapter 7. The authors Agnieszka Swietek and Wiktor Osuch state that just under 17,000 citizens in Poland claim they are Roma, though they believe the figure is closer to 20,000–25,000 (2019, pp. 135–157). There are four distinct, highly hierarchized Roma groups in Poland: Polska, Bergitka, Kalderash and Lovari. Overall, the Roma population in Poland is poorly educated. Currently, only 2% of Roma have completed higher education and 7% have completed secondary education. After providing a historic overview of these groups in Poland with a reflection on the source of the current problems (i.e. the education policy of the communist government toward Roma for many decades), the authors focus on governmental initiatives designed to equalize the knowledge levels and opportunities between non-Roma and Roma citizens related to education, employment, health, hygiene, and housing conditions. The Program for the Social Integration of the Roma Community in Poland (2014–2020) has a budget over 20 million EUR and it is designed to address social and educational discrepancies between Roma and non-Roma Poles. While this program has had tremendous success, many problems still remain, such as an insufficient number of trained staff to work with Roma students, many Roma students struggling to speak Polish, a lack of educational aspirations and motivations among Roma students, and a shortage of tolerance and acceptance toward Roma students in Polish schools.

Chapter 8 addresses the social and educational opportunities of the Roma minority in Romania. The author, Aurora Adina Colomeischi, gives an overview of Roma people, stating that while their official population is between 535,000 and 620,000 (2.5–3%), the Council of Europe estimations are closer to 1.85–2.5 million (8.3–11.5%), which reveals severe discrepancy (2019, 159–179). In Romania, the poverty rate for the Roma population is three times higher than average, which has resulted from the poor level of health and education, the high levels of discrimination, and the limited opportunities in the labor market for this minority group. Despite their large numbers, Roma are underrepresented in academics, employment and politics. Only 10% of Roma have completed secondary school compared to 58% of the non-Roma population in Romania. One issue is that the Romanian education system is highly competitive due to high-stakes national exams, and therefore lower-performing minority students often fall through the cracks and don't get the attention they need from teachers who focus on higher-performing students. Another problem is that studies have shown expansive segregation at schools based on the discriminatory attitudes of the community, students and teachers toward the Roma minority, which contributes to the achievement gap between Roma and non-Roma



students. To counter this problem, the national government has decentralized its Ministry of Education to allow for local governments to address the issues in their communities. The Strategy for Inclusion of the Romanian Citizens Belonging to Roma Minority (2015–2020) is a governmental initiative developed to help local municipalities improve Roma people's access to education, work places, healthcare, housing, and social services. Highlights of the interventions covered were remedial Second Chance Programs, grants for Roma pupils and addressing the issue of early school leaving.

The final country report in chapter 9 explores the educational realities of the Roma minority in Slovakia. As in all of the countries reviewed in the book, the Roma people in Slovakia are also at risk of poverty, discrimination, social exclusion and marginalization in the education system and labor market. The author, Rastislav Rosinsky, states that while data on the Roma population is unreliable, the most recent census from 2011 reports just over 105,000 Roma citizens in Slovakia (Ohidy & Forray R., 2019, pp. 181–201). However, other estimates are over 400,000 (around 7.5% of the total population). An estimated 10% of Roma have completed secondary school, and only one in 500 Roma students attend college or university. To counter these trends, the Slovakian government has implement several policies and support programs to enhance the educational outlook for the Roma minority, including a 0 Year program for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to “catch up” academically, training for pedagogical assistants to work with Roma students needing additional assistance in the classroom, projects for inclusive education and development of community centers to provide outreach in the form of remedial education, prevention programs and leisure time activities for Roma youth.

The concluding chapter by Ohidy summarizes the findings of the book and examines the common challenges of Roma communities, explaining the interplay between educational outcome, socioeconomic status and social mobility (Ohidy, 2009, pp. 203–220). This closing section offers another overview of the most essential challenges, listing international and regional literature to help analyze the impact of EU policies. Among the challenges, the author notes the concern that Roma are not considered official national minorities in every country (see Bulgaria and Moldova), and therefore they are more likely to suffer from social exclusion (Ladanyi & Szelenyi, 2004). Ohidy also points out that despite welfare payments being tied to mandatory pre-school enrollment, statistics show that many Roma children do not attend pre-schools from age 3, and often join much later (at ages 5–6); therefore, the achievement gap is already evident in Kindergarten when school-readiness is tested. International empirical research also supports these findings and early language mapping in the United States inspired school-based and home-based interventions for students of color in 20 states which was aiming at closing the word gap between lower socioeconomic status children (SES) and higher socioeconomic status peers (Gilkerson et al., 2017; Hart & Risley, 1995). In elementary schools Roma pupils often sit as second-class citizens receiving remedial education in de-facto segregated schools or classes waiting to be caught up to national curricular standards. By secondary and tertiary levels drop-out rates are extremely high and vocational trainings are also unattractive if they are offered by the same schools and taught by the same teachers that already exhibited cultural prejudice towards Roma (Ohidy, 2009). Very few Roma succeed in completing their education in the same timeframe as non-Roma. Instead, they need to take a “detour way” by attending evening high school and earning a degree much later in life next to family and work (Forray & Hegedus, 2003). ERRC and Amnesty International continues to voice concern in their reports about cultural prejudice and “systematic denial to Roma of the right to education”, which “cannot be overcome



without implementation of comprehensive desegregation programs” with international monitoring as a leverage to ensure reinforcement (ERRC, 2002, p. 1; Ohidy, 2019, p. 216).

In conclusion, this publication can be commended for not only acknowledging what is lacking but also for saluting good practices such as grassroots education projects and successful INGO support programs and grants. However, it firmly stresses the importance of continuous human rights monitoring and a more consistent international pressure on governments to adhere to top-down European policy measures targeting comprehensive desegregation and social inclusion. This publication is a valuable contribution to the academic fields of social and education sciences with its up-to-date and relevant resources. It will hopefully generate fresh dialog that help us reconsider old pedagogical practices towards Roma. It shall foster new ethics of care and culturally responsive teaching that no longer relies on a deficiency model, in which Roma are seen as lacking certain competencies (Zembylas, Bozalek, & Shefer, 2014).

This book is recommended for doctoral students in social and education sciences, teachers and teacher-trainers, education policymakers, and Roma rights activists. It offers a comparative look at the current Roma education discourse from the perspective of lifelong learning and community empowerment. Teacher training in the region shall embrace European history in which Roma are no longer a “hidden minority” (Cavioni & Forray, 2020, p. 68; Wogg, Pawlata, & Wiedenhofer, 2002). This collection of essays helps us look under the veneer of minority rights and search for a bolder approach, in which collective responsibility must persistently challenge economic inequality and hold our governments accountable for implementing Roma integration policies in full. Lifelong learning might be the engine that powers “equal opportunity,” and has the potential to foster diversity and inclusion interweaving Roma and non-Roma communities through service-learning, vocational training, and professional development.

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