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# Management of the Educational Risk Factors in Roma Schools

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## Abstract

The paper presents a recent research study on the management of risk factors in educational units with Roma students (Roma schools) - as risk factors in education are considered obstacles in achieving school performances. The research aimed to investigate from the quality management perspective the strategies of the school units for addressing a series of the educational risk factors with a focus on "Roma pupil's population", one of the 15 risk factors identified in Romania by RAQAPE (The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance on Pre-University Education) and stated by the Ministerial Order 6517/19.12.2012.

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*Keywords:* Roma Students, Educational Environment, Educational Risk Factors, Improvement Measures, Equal Opportunities

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## 1. Problem Statement

Paraphrasing two renowned studies and reference compositions in the specialized literature, we can (re) assert: currently, in its existing conditions, the school is at a crossroads (Nedelcu, et al. 2010). Educational reform, which has at its core Curriculum Reform, is considered to be a protracted process, conducted in parallel with the everyday educational process. The present is characterized by endeavors carried out on all fronts that concern the "re-thinking of education", and posture its main "victims" as its main beneficiaries - cohorts of students that pass through the system to be reformed during all this time. At the forefront of the collateral damage are obviously the most vulnerable of them all, the Roma students. In the event that there are voices still conjecturing why Roma children are considered the most exposed, remember that, in addition to distortions of the system, in their case significant historical and socio-economic differences also act, compared to the general population. The existing disparities

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between this ethnic minority in particular and mainstream population are emphasized against a background of undesirability that occurs day after day in the marginalization by the society of Roma individuals - by means of discriminatory attitudes, social exclusion and often educational segregation. The problematic of social inclusion of Roma individuals is a rampant topic and concern among EU officials, as in Europe, Roma people establish the largest ethnic minority group with an assessed population of 10 to 12 million. While there is very limited research distinctively about Roma youths, it is estimated that about 4 million young Roma live in the 47 Councils of Europe member states. The Roma population is younger than the EU average: 26.7% of Roma are aged between 15 and 29 compared to 19.3% in the EU. Enrolling in school is a key moment for the young people in terms of encountering racism and discrimination for the first time and having to cope with the grueling fact of being perceived as different by virtue of their ethnicity. During this time, the young Roma people we interviewed envisioned education as quintessential for success and for advancement in their lives. Discrimination, humiliation and bullying during their first school years had an everlasting influence on young people's self-esteem and prospects for their forthcoming. (Fremlova L., Georgescu M., Hera G. et al., (2014), *Barrabaripen / Equality: Young Roma speak about multiple discrimination*, pg. 14-15. Council of Europe: Strasbourg.

## 2. Study Purpose

Westfall and Pisapia (1994), Omardin (1996), Henderson (1998), Moore (2006), McMahon and Brenda (2007) and the latest OECD Reports provides solid arguments for the educational environment's influence on student's performance, the role of school in overcoming the social background and the equity in learning opportunities. The studies on student's resilience conducted by Omardin (1996), Thomas (2004), Moore (2006), Olaleye (2010) provide us with valuable insights, as well as the researches on the academic optimism: McGuigan, Leigh and Hoy, Wayne K, 2006, 204), Hoy, et. al. (2005), etc.

With regard to the problematic in Romania, a database on the educational risk factors was developed by RAQAPE in 2012 - the National Map of Educational Risk - in order to accurately identify what facts and dynamics from the learning environment obstruct the educational act and undermine the school enactment of students. Therefore, today we are able to know both the elements that are positively correlated with student achievement (teacher participation in continuing vocational training, number of library books per student, percentage of students who have library cards, number of computers per student, number of computers with Internet access per student) and factors that adversely affect educational outcomes (education level of the family, the percentage of students from families with economic difficulties, the percentage of students from dysfunctional families, the percentage of Roma students, percentage of students with special educational needs, the mobility of teachers, the percentage of classes held by recently hired teachers, share of lessons held by qualified teachers, education space allotted per student, number of pardoned student absences, number of unexcused student absences).

Therefore, in the center of our concern was the manner in which the system has reacted in the tackle with its chronic and modern problems, taking in reflection the importance of the international scenery when in an era of globalization, technological developments and increasing labor mobility, education systems need to attain similar levels of competence to have socially integrated, successful graduates that can lucratively cope with jobs that have not even been invented when they were still in basic training. In this respect, our research investigated whether in Romania, in those schools with Roma students, ethnicity as educational risk factor is managed and addressed as such, as well as the effectiveness of measures implemented in order to reduce the risk caused by the ethnic element correlated with a number of other risk factors identified in the educational environment.

## 3. Research methodology

To accomplish it, the research objectives were: (1) to identify 16 pre-university level schools, with a potential educational risk caused by the presence of Roma pupils in the school population; (2) describe the manner in which the quality management is conducted in the units investigated in relation to the recommendations from RAQAPE in reference with the factors that positively or negatively influence educational outcomes of students; (3) and to analyze the improvement measures designed by the school units in order to reduce educational risk of Roma children and the upturn of their academics, if/where they were identified. In this approach we started from a series of

assumptions, based on the premise that school managers know the legal provisions stipulated by OMECTS no. 6517 / 19.12.2012 concerning the approval of the methodology for external evaluation of the quality of education in secondary education, as they have internalized and applied them consistently.

There were both the quantitative methods (questionnaire survey) and qualitative (case study, data mining, interview, documentary analysis: institutional development project, the annual internal assessment report, the school web page) - accordingly, we applied the triangulation principle. The research samples included 16 pre-university schools from all of the 8 development regions of Romania, 8 pairs of units, which have different percentages of Roma pupils. The questionnaire survey was an essential method of investigating the management of risk factors. The opinion questionnaire was applied to 64 teachers from each school, consequently being accounted as the main tool for data collection on how they perceive the presence of at-risk students, especially students of Roma origin and if they, in these circumstances, realize the need to implement additional measures to support their learning process. Individual interview was conducted with the headmaster of each school selected as a structured interview, with items designed on the dimensions resulted from the operational concepts "risk factors" and "management of risk factors". The focus group was led in three schools from the 16 investigated, and through it we were able to obtain valuable qualitative data about attitudes, perceptions and opinions of the participants. Document analysis was performed on a series of documents interrelated to management and internal evaluation: institutional development project, annual report of internal evaluation, external evaluation report - against a criterial analysis sheet. The criterias for analysis were reported in the operational concepts, and the data obtained was analyzed, interpreted and presented as case studies of the schools investigated.

#### 4. Findings and Results

Necessary measures that need to be taken in communities with at-risk students are complex and need to be applied at several levels simultaneously: at school level (development of positive relationships between students and teachers leads to student involvement and a dramatic decrease in dropout tendencies, development of relationships between students and parents through parenting programs, development of relationships between community members) at family level through its social support programs, and at community level through support programs for families in need. (cited Razali, ASBAH et al, 2013 53-55).

From our research results, however, within the units investigated, the presence of Roma students in the school is not perceived as an education risk factor by the school management, by Roma ethnicity itself, but through the way they choose to behave at school (attitude toward school, toward learning, motivation on attendance, etc.), as evidenced by the perception of the principals about Roma students in connection to other categories alongside „at risk students” - poor students, students from single parent families, students with SEN, students left in the care of relatives.

Therefore, we believe that efforts are made in some cases, but their effectiveness would be significantly enhanced if they were integrative measures, acting simultaneously on different levels: methods taken by each and every teacher for each student pertaining the learning process in the classroom and on the other hand to ensure that a favorable school context (introduction of intercultural elements, from the Roma family, counselling students and parents), the local community and the policy makers (ensuring minimum resources for the Roma family, creating local and / or regional perspective) by NGOs that may have relevant programs to already identified needs, in partnership with the school and local community.

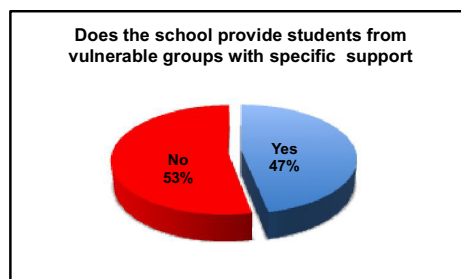


Figure 1.

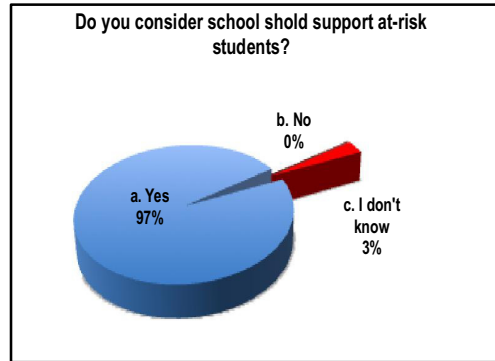


Figure 2.

In return, at the level of educational managers there is a helpless contradictory discourse, as the school cannot cope through its outmoded way of approach the deciphering of current problems whose root causes continuously evolve.

From the results of the external evaluation done by RAQAPE, it was revealed that schools selected and evaluated received recommendations to improve the activity of orientation and support given to students at educational risk (not specifically for Roma pupils), but they were not evaluated unsatisfactory, but referred to the progress of these students. Regarding the management of risk factors, the data collected showed that there are procedures to identify students at risk, including Roma children, the data collected by the class teachers are analyzed, processed, and measures are established, but only by the school board, in a declarative way, and therefore not assumed by teachers. Also, there is no analysis of the impact of measures already implemented; and failure, in terms of the school, always has external causes, thus there is a clear lack of accountability coming from the school unit management.

### 5. Conclusions

As a result of the analysis of the independent variable - Roma students and the dependent variable - educational risk, the school board does not consider Roma students as an educational risk category, but as a category with specific problems that can be addressed in one way or another. Of course, this view can be seen through the following context: in schools with higher number of Roma students we can find the presence of NGOs that can support the programs and projects of Roma pupils, and on the other hand, the existence of Roma pupils reduced in number compared to majority students is identified, but not pursued.

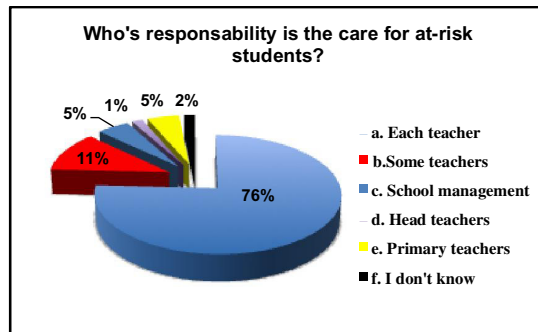


Figure 3.

Although measures of improvement are defined and implemented in some cases, they are not included in the management and internal evaluation documents, and especially within the institutional practice. There are common education risk factors, but there is not evidence that we have a set of common indicators for which there have been designed specific improvement measures.

The processes taken for reducing the educational risk in Roma schools, in order to be operative, need first of all the accountability of the various stakeholders within the educational environment. There should be involved at decision, strategic and action levels members of local community, decision makers at local and central level, NGOs, family, school management and each teacher while working individually with its pupils and their parents. The interventions of these actors have to be simultaneously taken, integrative and consistent with the specific needs evidence-based identified at individual level, class, school unit level, community and national government.

In the Romanian schools examined we have found again managers and teachers with a profound detachment of responsibility, the “scapegoats” for the Roma pupils’ situation in education being in their vision the pupil’s family; the idea of integrated interventions is still in a pioneer phase and the construct of family – community – school partnership remains trapped in a conceptual/speech stage, after more than a decade since it was introduced massively by the Ministry of Education through the PHARE Programs granted by the European Commission.

Romania was part of a recent study of the Council of Europe (issued in June 2014) which describes in detail the situation of Roma children in schools: across Europe, pre-school, primary and secondary education systems often fail to ensure equality of opportunity and outcome for Roma children. Even though the impact of pre-school education on the child’s intellectual and social development has been widely acknowledged as positive, it is rarely available to Roma children. While 3% of non-Roma children fail to complete primary education, the rate among Roma children is 50% (Linge and Warmisham, 2013), resulting in Roma children having very poor literacy and numeracy skills, and fewer chances to participate within the labor market. In this respect, the issue of gender also plays an important role: the illiteracy rate in South-Eastern Europe is 32% for Roma women, compared with 22% for Roma men); as a result, in some countries, Roma girls are the lowest achieving group (UNICEF, 2011).

Additionally, across Central and Eastern Europe, Roma children are still streamed into special classes and/or schools for the mentally and physically disabled, or ghetto schools, leading to de facto racial segregation. Since these schools teach less-demanding school curricula, Roma children are unable to go on to secondary and/or tertiary education. The number of those who do so is extremely low, about 0.9% (Linge and Warmisham, 2013).

Segregation, discrimination, racist stereotyping, bullying and violence, including from school staff, targeting young Roma in the school setting, are the most significant factors hindering Roma young people’s achievement, attainment and successful completion of the education process. Hostility of the majority school environment and the school curricula that often sideline the Roma’s history, culture and traditions represent an additional negative factor. Participation in the school’s community life may be challenging, at times impossible for Roma, most of whom have a different social status, are routinely rejected by non-Roma parents and/or often cannot afford the associated expenses such as clothes, books or other equipment. For many Roma young people today a vicious cycle of poverty and social exclusion starts very early on in their lives: at school, with poor attendance, educational achievement and attainment. Without qualifications and skills, employment is difficult to come by. This also has repercussions on citizenship and social participation, which are key factors in social inclusion.

The findings of the research on educational risk factors in Romania have generated for authors a wellhead of ideas for continuing with studies on a topic, which is been considered by EU’s decision-makers a crucial one at European level - the educational advancement of Roma. Thus, there are premises for the start-up of a solid groundwork in the field of action research and evidence-based advocacy research that is mandatory in order to have evidence-based, effective public policies to facilitate *de facto* educational inclusion of the Roma students, using the means of the quality management system that already exist in our country.

*“My first memories from school are the saddest of my life. I never felt as bad in my life. I was very shy and I was always by myself. I remember my elementary teacher. She made me sit on the last bench of the “stupid row”. She would often beat me, pull me by my hair and by my ears, and call me names such as “good for nothing Gypsy”.*

*“My parents had no education at all, or jobs. We collected scrap and plastic bottles. Due to our poverty, my sister and I never went to school; at school kids need books, clothes, and shoes, which we could not afford. I don't know how to read or write. Now I am so sorry I never went to school. I think people can have a better life if they go to school. Life is different in a good sense: only with some education can you get a job. In my situation, who would give me a job? I wish my parents had sent me to school.”*

*“My biggest dream would be to graduate from high school; I dreamt about being a fashion designer when I was little but I know you have to be very blessed to achieve such a thing. I want just a regular job, permanent and legal, to feel secure and to provide for my family, no matter what kind of job, except in public sanitation, which Roma usually get.”*

Fremlova L., Georgescu M., Hera G. *et al.*, (2014), *Barrabaripen / Equality: Young Roma speak about multiple discrimination*, pg. 14-15. Council of Europe: Strasbourg.

Note: the present paper has been developed based on a research study for the MA Dissertation June 2014, coordinated by Prof.Dr.IoanNeacșu, FPSE, UB; the full version of the study comprises almost 100 pages, and the reference list over 60 titles. A selected list of titles:

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