

SCHOOL MEDIATORS AS A MECHANISM FOR INCREASING EDUCATIONAL LEVEL AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN ROMA COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The issue of Roma education is a widely discussed subject in the recent literature. The low level of education is an important indicator of the Roma population's socio-economic precariousness. An important and innovative mechanism that aims to increase the educational level and to produce empowerment in Roma communities is the school mediator. In Romania, the school mediator has been recognized as a professional role since 2001, but there are not enough monitoring activities and statistical data regarding the impact of this integration mechanism on communities. This paper aims to identify and discuss some important dimensions of the work of school mediators in Brașov County, Romania. We carried out a content analysis of the school mediators' reports which are periodically sent to the County School Inspectorate Brașov. Our results suggest that school mediators represent an important human resource for better understanding Roma communities and for providing new place-based tools that could contribute to increase Roma education level and their social integration.

Keywords: Roma communities, education, school mediators.

INTRODUCTION

Roma represent the largest ethnic minority in Europe, and they experience severe social exclusion expressed by high poverty, low education and lack of participation in the political and cultural life [1]. The number of Roma in Europe is estimated between seven and nine million; most of them are living in Central and

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Eastern Europe [2], where they historically have faced poverty, racism and social disadvantages [3], [4].

Although significant efforts are made at national, European and international levels to protect the fundamental rights and to increase the degree of social integration for this ethnic minority, the number of Roma facing extreme poverty, marginalization and discrimination remains very high [5].

The issue of Roma education is a widely discussed topic in the recent literature. The research conducted in the last decade in Europe shows that the most serious problems regarding the Roma's education are: the low level of participation in pre-school education, the high rates of dropout before the graduation from secondary education; the low rates of literacy and the risk of segregation in schools [5]; more specifically, "a greater proportion of Romani children do not attend primary school than the similarly situated non-Romani children living in the neighbourhood. At least 10% of Roma children aged 7 to 15 in Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, France and Italy are [...] not attending school" [6] (p. 5).

The low level of education has negative effects in terms of prospects for employment and income, of living conditions and health status, "limiting the Roma's general ability to fully realize their potential" [5] (p. 3). In fact, the low level of education is an important indicator of the Roma population's socio-economic precariousness. Low levels of education and the lack of qualifications cause higher unemployment rates among the Roma [2].

In Romania, the main social problems of Roma communities are connected with the low level of education: unemployment and lack of employment opportunities, health problems and reduced access to healthcare, overcrowding of houses and residential areas, passivity and lack of involvement in solving their problems [7].

In Europe, education is considered a key-area in the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 [8] where it was established as a main goal to "ensure that all Roma children complete at least primary school".

Ever since 1990, the Romanian Ministry of Education has initiated projects for the Roma's education, but starting with 1998 one can talk of a coherent strategy that makes "the successful Romanian experience today – in the direction of co-opting, training and maintaining the Roma resource in the educational system" be "unique in the world, not only at the European level" [9] (p. 69). The main goals of this strategy are: to form a young Roma intellectuality, through their access to high and higher education; to preserve the Roma language, history and culture in the educational system (considered an innovative approach at international level); to continuously increase the number of Roma pre-schoolers and pupils; to reduce the Roma's discrimination in the school space, as well as to reduce school absenteeism and dropout – this last objective being considered the greatest challenge of the educational policy for the Roma in Romania [9].

In the framework of this national strategy, an important mechanism that aims to increase the educational level and to produce empowerment in Roma communities

is the school mediator. This paper aims to identify and discuss some important aspects regarding the work of the school mediators in Braşov County, Romania: the school mediators' profile, their main activities, their perceptions about the communities they work for and the tools by which their work is evaluated.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL MEDIATORS IN ROMANIA

In Romania, shortly after the fall of communism in 1989, various organizations from abroad brought and began to implement the role of school mediator in working with "schools with problems" [9], and the non-governmental organization Romani Criss, in cooperation with the Intercultural Institute, proposed the creation of the position of school mediator in the Romanian education system [10].

The school mediator has been recognized as a professional role in Romania since 2001. In the period 2003–2014, the Romanian Ministry of Education trained over 1,200 Roma school mediators [9]. Since 2011, UNICEF Romania has conducted, in partnership with the Ministry of National Education, with other public institutions and with non-governmental organizations, the Campaign "Hai la şcoală!" [Let's go to school], within which 50–60 school mediators were trained annually, and the "The School Mediator's Guide – for Roma Communities" was issued. [11], [12].

In the "The Strategy of the Romanian Government for the Inclusion of the Romanian Citizens Belonging to the Roma Minority for the Period 2015–2020" it is emphasised that "education is the key-area that ensures the sustainability of the intervention for the social inclusion of the Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma minority" (point 2) and it is established as a proposed result for the year 2020 the "recruitment and employment of school mediators in all the 1,680 educational establishments where the number of Roma children and pupils is minimum 15%" (point 8) [13].

The school mediator is part of the auxiliary teaching staff, is paid by the education system (Law of National Education, 2011) [14] and has the main task "to support the participation of all children in the community in the compulsory education, by encouraging parental involvement in the children's education and school life, and by facilitating the cooperation between families, community and school" [15].

In Braşov county, on August 31st, 2013, 39 school mediators were registered [9], representing the highest level at county level in Romania. In 2019, 44 school mediators are registered – according to the data supplied by Braşov County School Inspectorate.

Although it is considered one of the most important mechanisms for offering support to Roma pupils, in Romania we do not have yet enough monitoring activities and statistical data regarding the impact of this integration mechanism on

the communities. According to Pop and Balea (2016) [10], “there is scarce information about the impact of this measure, and the work of school mediators is described within a vague legislative framework” (p. 153).

Probably the first research that highlights a series of dimensions of the school mediators’ activity in Romania is the one conducted by Pop and Balea (2016) from the perspective of Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory [10]. The two authors analyse the data obtained through a questionnaire sent via email, on a group of 171 school mediators in Romania. Although our opinion is that the conclusions are not very well substantiated by the methodology resorted to (a series of perceptions are identified and it is only on their basis that the conclusions are drawn as regards the reproduction of a public discourse perpetuating inequalities), the two authors’ study has the merit of providing a systematic image on who the school mediators are and how they perceive their activity. The results of this study provide basic data on the school mediator’s socio-demographic profile, as well as a few mediators’ perceptions on their work.

A research conducted in the county of Braşov, Romania in 2015 showed that the educational situation of Roma children was generally worse than the one of non-Roma children [16]. Roma children had a higher number of unexcused absences, a higher dropout rate and poorer results at the national evaluation at the end of the eighth grade. One of the solutions considered effective by the interviewees in this research (school principals, professors, parents of Roma children and local leaders) was “the presence of a mediator in school, who facilitates communication with Roma families”; they also „proposed that school mediators should be hired long-term in local communities with a significant number of Roma children. The mediator does not have to be Roma, but s/he has to know the Roma community very well and must have advanced communication skills” (p. 89).

METHODOLOGY

We carried out an analysis of the school mediators’ reports which are periodically sent to the County School Inspectorate Braşov. Our approach was of the qualitative semi-inductive type and we resorted to the techniques of thematic coding and axial coding [17]. The *thematic coding* is done when we are interested in analysing certain topics which were previously defined. In our case, these topics were defined in the open question addressed to the mediators: activities, results, problems/difficulties and proposals. By *axial coding*, we discovered several categories and sub-categories in the framework of these themes and we established, furthermore, a series of links between the categories discovered and the research participants’ profile.

The universe of our research was represented by the school mediators employed in the State education system in Braşov County (amounting to 44) and the research group (participants) included 41 reports of these mediators, which were received at Braşov County Inspectorate until September 24th, 2019, two weeks after the start of 2019–2020 school year.

Their reports include a number of quantitative data (the mediators' socio-demographic data and indicators on the Roma pupils' number and school activity), as well as qualitative (written) data requested by means of an open question: "Describe on at least one page the activity carried out during the second semester of the 2018–2019 school year, taking into account the activities in which you were involved, the results obtained, the problems/difficulties encountered, as well as a series of proposals to improve the school-mediation activity".

From these reports, we selected, for the purpose of this research, only the mediators' socio-demographic data and the qualitative ones, requested through the open question presented above. The data were processed and analysed by means of the NVivo 12 software.

We organised the presentation of the results in two parts: in the first one, we will show what the school mediators' socio-demographic profile is in Braşov County; and in the second one, we will present the main categories of results obtained from the analysis of the qualitative data in the school mediator's reports.

MAIN RESULTS

In Braşov County, most school mediators are women (36 women and 5 men) aged over 35 years. A distribution of the participants by gender and age groups is shown in figure 1 (*Figure 1*).

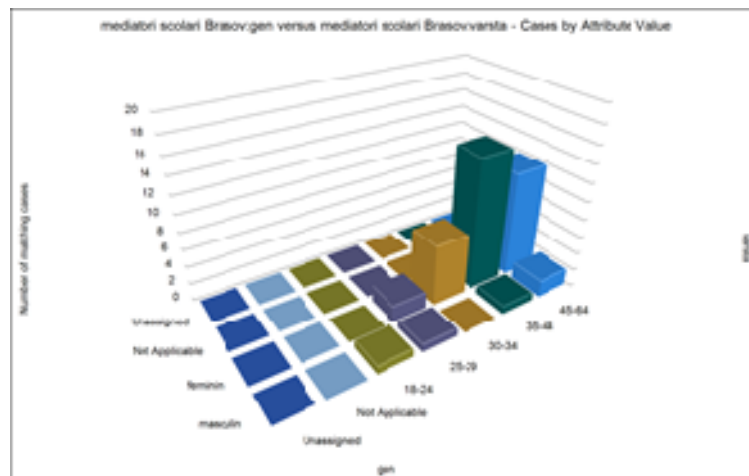


Figure 1 – Distribution of the participants by gender and age groups.

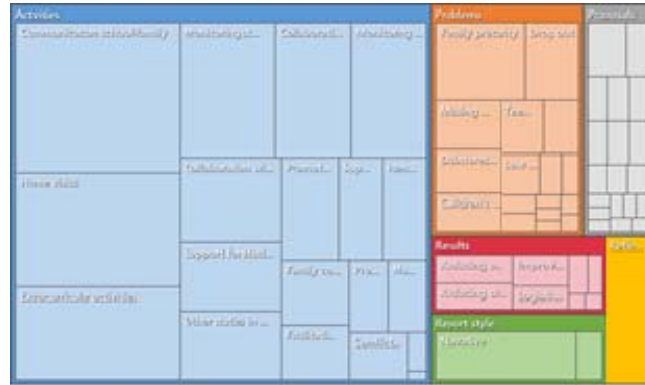


Figure 3 – Hierarchy chart of the main topics.

We further present, in turn, the main categories we discovered for each of the analysed topics (activities, problems, proposals and results), specifying that, in this paper, we present only a part of the obtained results, more specifically the categories that appear in the hierarchies made in NVivo, on the first five places in the order of the volume of information (measured as number of references). For each category, we put in brackets the number of references, as generated in the data encoding process in NVivo.

As regards the activities carried out by the mediators, most references are made to the following categories: school-family communication (71), home visits (54), extracurricular activities (44), monitoring students at risk (34), and collaboration with the school staff (30). In total, we identified 19 forms of activity that school mediators describe, most of them being of the communication-facilitation-counselling-monitoring type.

The main social problems that school mediators identify in their communities and in the relation school-community are the following: family precarity (22), dropout (13), skipping classes (10), disinterest in education (9) and children's work (8). Overall, we identified 17 categories of problems.

As solutions to such problems, school mediators have the following proposals: keeping and improving the school-family-community communication (7), raising the awareness about education (4), psychological counselling for students and parents (3), more educational programs (3), intercultural activities (3), home visits (3), the presence of a health mediator in the community (3), continuous training for educators in working with Roma children (3), increased involvement of the local authorities in sustaining education (2), collaborations of the stakeholders for reducing school dropout (2) and promoting collaboration and positive measures in the classroom (2). We have more than five categories for "Solutions" because there are several categories with the same score, so we have put in this list all the

(59%) and a Roma ethnic (68%) [...] In terms of education, it is very common for them to have graduated from high school, while only 2 in 10 school mediators have a tertiary education” (p. 158–159).

The typical school mediator in Braşov county is a woman, is aged between 35 and 64 years, works in a rural school, is of Roma ethnicity, has secondary education and a seniority in the position of mediator either under 5 years, or over 10 years. Although the law stipulates that the mediators must have completed at least the high-school studies and must have acquired the baccalaureate degree, some of them (4 persons) do not comply with this condition. According to the discussions we had with the representatives of Braşov County School Inspectorate, these persons, although they do not have sufficient studies, know very well the Roma community and are even leaders in these communities, which facilitates the school-family-community communication.

There is scarce evidence in the literature regarding the topic of school mediators for Roma communities. A study conducted in Serbia shows that the national program for introducing the role of *Roma Teaching Assistant* has positive results, and the authors propose that “programs targeting Roma should take into account their culture and specificity and ensure that the program gets accepted by the community” [1]. A similar role is presented in the literature as *Intercultural Mediator* [18], but with reference to the relations between immigrants and the receiving communities.

The activities described by the school mediators are in agreement with the legal provisions regarding their attributions [19], but what the analysis of reports highlights is precisely a hierarchy of the activities, highlighting, for instance, the importance of home visits or extracurricular activities.

As regards the social problems which the mediators name in their reports, the hierarchy generated by NVivo, according to the volume of information about the categories concerned, is probably not very important, because every problem per se may be a significant topic of reflection and of action within the educational policies. For instance, the problem “teenage mothers and early marriages”, although on the six place in our ranking, is one of the most sensitive topics in the social integration – preservation of traditional values equation. We dare say such topics deserve to be the subject of future in-depth research, possibly by combining the quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Although only 18 mediators have proposed solutions to the problems encountered, they have a great diversity and we consider each and every one valuable, even if proposed by a small number of mediators. Most of these solutions, such as improving the school-family communication, the collaboration with stakeholders, a more attractive school through cooperative actions and positive measures in the classroom, more educational programs, or even sanctioning parents if they don’t send their children to school, are consistent with those obtained in other studies [16], but others are new and, as we tend to believe,

they either reflect local needs, or are examples of good practice, hence solutions which are already in place: the existence of a health mediator in the community, the parents' participation in extracurricular activities or psychological counselling for the child and family.

The least represented topic in the mediators' reports is that of the results obtained; although, from the discussions with the representatives of Braşov County School Inspectorate, there are such results and they may constitute examples of good practice. Unfortunately, the results are not very well reflected in the reports analysed by us; therefore, at this point, as well, we suggest the improvement of the collection and enhancement methodology, in the future educational policies for the Roma.

The mediators' language, when describing their activities, is mostly an official one. It is definitely the technical and objective language specific to the materials they studied in the training courses for mediators. Apart from the given examples, in few cases do the mediators have subjective wordings or personal opinion. They rather seem to reproduce an institutional language (here we agree with Pop and Balea [10] and we recognize the same limit of our research, as in the case of the two authors quoted: as it comes to official reports sent to the supervisory authority, we may face, to a certain extent, the pressure of the compliance with the task and of the desirable answers. Their writing style is fairly homogeneous and in some cases they seem to have inspired one another.

However, in general, the reports rather have a narrative structure than a technical one. In few cases, they are only a list of activities or of problems, solutions etc. Most of them combine topic listing with customization, often using descriptions and examples of the situations in the field. The highest number of examples were given for the "extracurricular activities" category, which seems to be the most creative part of their work. As the narrative style prevails, we tend to believe that these reports were not written under institutional pressure, according to a rigid standard, but they reflect, to a certain extent, their specific professional experience.

Therefore we consider that school mediators represent a very important resource to better understand the social world of Roma communities, to have deeper, more comprehensive explanations that bring something new to the official discourse explaining Roma social exclusion. We suggest that the ethnographical research, through in-depth interviews with school mediators and even participant observation, may provide a deeper understanding of the social-exclusion mechanisms and may offer innovative ideas meant to increase social integration. This would avoid bias or compliance with the task, identifiable to a certain extent in drafting the activity reports.

On the other hand, the data collection tool (the school mediator's report) may be very useful in assessing the impact of the school mediator's activity on the Roma communities, if longitudinal analyses are performed, to measure the changes over time. This tool was created, at Braşov county level, by one of the co-authors (Diana Szasz) and she herself admits that this is the first systematic analysis of

their content. Furthermore, many of the school mediators (although they do not have higher education) are leaders of the Roma communities, so they have or can have a strong impact on the communities and know very well, from the inside, the socio-economic situation of the communities.

School mediators are therefore an important resource within the framework of the national policy for Roma in Romania, but we are talking about a resource still insufficiently exploited for providing important insights, with a view to understanding the cultural and social roots underlying the marginalization of many Roma communities, and to finding the best place-based solutions for avoiding Roma social exclusion.

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