

## *Book Review*

*by Anja Franz*

**Andrea Óhidy & Katalin R. Forray (Eds.) (2019). *Lifelong Learning and the Roma Minority in Central and Eastern Europe*. Emerald Publishing Limited. 240 pp., ISBN: 9781838672607 (Hardcover)**

Roma people live throughout all European countries. They are Europe's largest and fastest-growing minority group with about 10-12 million people living mostly in the Central, Eastern and Southern parts of the continent. At the same time, they are the most disadvantaged group in Europe in regard to health, labour, housing and education. Despite all of this, little is known about Roma in European countries: they are referred to as a "hidden" or "forgotten" minority (p.2).

The anthology of Andrea Óhidy and Katalin R. Forray addresses this research gap and provides an overview of the current social and educational situation of Roma people in Central and Eastern Europe. It discusses the policies implemented to develop the success of Roma in education in these eight Central and Eastern European countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. It addresses professionals in the field of education sciences and practice in Europe and beyond.

The book opens with the introduction "Lifelong Learning and the Roma Minority in Central and Eastern Europe" by Katalin R. Forray and Andrea Óhidy (pp. 1-13). This chapter offers the reader a short overview about the Roma people in Europe and provides information about the current information regarding the social status and education of European Roma. It also includes helpful insights about the structure of the anthology.

In Chapter 1 "Bottom up, Top down and Human Rights - Roma Organizations, Policy Frameworks and European Institutions" (pp. 15-24) Natasha Hofmann reviews the policy measures aimed at the improvement of the education of Roma people following the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 by the European Union (EU). She focuses on the discourse surrounding the European perception of Roma. After all, this decade produced a number of political achievements in the form of measures taken towards equal social participation and human rights for the Roma population. Continuous improvements in the education of Roma are recognized. Nevertheless, the problems of Roma people getting access to school, labour, housing and the healthcare system remain driven by discrimination and exclusion.

The following chapters have a similar structure and focus on the education situation of the Roma minority in various European countries starting with Bulgaria. The author Milena Ivova Ilieva clearly describes the disadvantages the Roma community faces in the Bulgarian education system (pp. 27-47). She gives a broad overview of the marginal position of Roma in the society by providing information on numbers, groups, names, legal status, social situation, culture and languages of Roma people in Bulgaria. She also presents a summary report of how the treatment of Roma in the Bulgarian education system is reliant on national statistical data. There is, however, a shortage of public data on ethnicity. Even the limited data which is available shows a low level of education among Roma children along with a great risk of illiteracy and complete school absenteeism. Ilieva takes a closer look at the source of these issues, finding that problems arise from economic conditions, attitudes towards the education of the Romany community, as well as attitudes from the majority population and the institutional setting within the state itself, closing "the vicious circle for the Roma people" (p. 34). There are various policy measures for Roma integration with the aim of

welfare improvement within this minority group, but they remain rather ineffective and fail to address the specific needs of the Roma community. Therefore the author gives twelve suggestions for improvement of the educational integration of Roma children: 1) Harmonization of all institutional programs, 2) regular monitoring of educational integration, 3) enhancement of early childhood education, 4) introduction of multicultural education to schools to overcome deprivation and frustration of Roma children, 5) enhancement of curricula towards the formation of an multicultural environment in schools, 6) perseverance from teachers, parents and children, 7) close community work with the parents to prepare an environments for homework, 8) involvement of the parents into all day school life, 9) introduction of changes in the law on education to prevent children from remaining illiterate while attending school, 10) encouragement of children searching for educational opportunities in addition to school, 11) improvement of the Roma living and working conditions and 12) promotion of kindergarten and school life using digital innovations.

Chapter 3 written by Goran Lapat and Renata Miljević-Ridički focuses on the education situation of the Roma minority in Croatia (p. 49-69). They take care to account for the specific circumstances of the lives of Roma women as they are "doubly marginalized because of their Roma ethnicity and their gender" (p. 49). Next to statistical data on numbers, groups, names, legal status, social situation, culture and languages of Roma people in Croatia, the authors provide interview data which give interesting insights into day-to-day problems of the Roma minority. The following pages give the reader some idea of the Croatian measures for improving Romani languages (p. 58) and Roma participation in the education system (p. 60). The data show that Roma children rarely attend preschool and that a large number does not complete elementary school. They also rarely attend secondary school or participate in tertiary education. The chapter ends with a summary of Croatian policies and support programs for Roma education (p. 65). However, the authors focus solely on the description of the situation, there is no information about the efficiency e.g. of the measures or programs.

Markéta Levínská, Dana Bitternová and David Doubek concentrate on the Roma minority in the Czech Republic (pp. 71-95). They describe the Roma minority as a heterogeneous group, regarding their economic and social status. After listing information about numbers, groups, names, legal and social status of the Roma people, the authors shed light on their educational attainment and policies and support programs. It seems that rather a high number of Roma children (one third) in the Czech Republic are attending a school for children with mild intellectual disabilities and there is a lack of inclusive education (p. 80). These matters should be urgently discussed with consideration of mechanisms of discrimination and racism. Current research related to the state of Roma education show that the "Roma ethnicity is perceived as problematic by schools, mainly teachers, and is not associated with positive cultural capital" (p. 85). Not surprisingly, Roma pupils of standard schools face stigmatization and rejection. This is why Roma parents tend to choose practical schools for their children. The authors conclude by describing family background, educational institutions, teaches and personal intentions as critical factors for the success of Roma children (pp. 86-89).

The next chapter from Julianna Boros and Eszter Gergye describes the situation of the Roma population in Hungary, based on available statistical data, with a focus on educational opportunities (pp. 97-114). In Hungary, Roma people are also "one of the most endangered by poverty and social exclusion" (p. 98). Overall, consistently low levels of education, high unemployment and lack of stable employment or sufficient income as well as segregation lead to deprivation and exclusion. The authors describe the Hungarian Roma minority as a "heterogenous group with regard to their spoken languages and their cultures" (p. 98). There are different linguistic groups whose lives vary heavily in terms of geographic locations, housing situations, and access to employment. The participation of Roma in education is referred to as "unsatisfactory" and successful educational

careers are still rare (p. 105). There are several initiatives and programs supporting success in school, but those initiatives are unfortunately not "widely spread throughout the country" (p. 110). In the summary of the chapter the authors state that education is the key to future life possibilities for Roma children. It is therefore important to strengthen their educational opportunities and help to prevent deprivation and discrimination: "Through the personal successes of Roma and Gypsy people, the whole society would benefit at a national level." (p. 112).

Roma in the education system in the Republic of Moldova is the topic of the chapter written by Maria Diacon (pp. 115-134). The chapter offers in-depth information about aspects of life conditions, health and education of this most precarious minority in the Republic of Moldova based on a quantitative study covering Roma households. The author describes the disadvantages the Roma community faces starting with providing information on numbers, groups, names, legal status, social situation, culture and languages of Roma people in the Republic of Moldova. Differences between the Roma education status and that of the rest of the population are the most dramatic, as Roma have a much lower level of education. Looking at illiteracy among the Roma, it shows that 21 percent of the Roma have no education at all while only three percent of the non-Roma population do not have basic reading and writing abilities (p. 127). This "practically excludes a significant part of the population from the social and economic life and significantly limits their possibilities to find well-paid jobs" (p. 126).

Agnieszka Świątek and Wiktor Osuch give an overview on the Roma community in Poland, the share of the population, its spatial distribution and the education of Romani children. Their research findings show that the educational situation of Roma students over the last decade has improved (p. 144-149). Additionally, some successful governmental programs of support for the education of Roma have been initiated (p. 149). However, Roma still have a low level of education, Roma students are more likely to not be accepted by their classmates and the contact between parents and the school seems to be limited. Therefore, the authors conclude: "The Romani education is now in the early stage of its development and it requires further support and monitoring." (p. 136).

Lifelong Learning for Roma in Romania is the topic of the chapter written by Aurora Adina Colomeischi. Roma people are the second largest minority group in Romania after Hungarians (p. 159-179). Based on statistical data, the author describes a great diversity of the Roma minority regarding geographical distribution, dialects, cultural heritage and traditions. Even though they are the most heterogeneous ethnic group in Romania, they face similar problems such as poor living conditions, low access to public goods and also a low level of education (p. 160). There are severe inequalities regarding education of Roma people starting in preschool education, as only very few Roma children attend kindergarten. While the level of education of Roma people is significantly lower than that of the general Romanian population, the most disadvantaged group is female Roma. The author describes several policies and support programs for Roma education in Romania (p. 171) as well as the Romanian initiative "Roma Children and Parents Want to School!" as an example for best practice (p. 176).

The Roma minority in Slovakia, the center of interest of Rastislav Rosinský, has the highest risk of poverty, discrimination and segregation (pp. 181-201). The Roma people suffer significantly from a lack of infrastructure and medical care in their communities as well as marginalization and even exclusion in the labour market. Education of Roma is also at very low level. A special issue is the attendance of so called "special schools" for pupils with special educational needs, "who are considered to be not sufficiently equipped to master the main education stream in primary and secondary schools". After finishing a special school, pupils cannot continue their education in a secondary school. Slovakia 60 percent of the children attending special schools are Roma children: "Roma children are in the trap of a vicious circle of poverty, marginalization and despair." (p. 195). There are several strategies for the support of Roma education in Slovakia such as the use of

pedagogical assistants or the development of community centres. The most important seems to be the establishment of "year 0" in primary school, which is to prevent experiences of failure and disinterest in school education. The children develop skills to master the first year of primary school such as language and motor skills (pp. 197-200).

Andrea Óhidy concludes with an overview of participation and success of Central and Eastern European Roma in education and lifelong learning (pp. 203-220). The Roma minority suffers in all those countries from poor health, low levels of education, and poor access to labour markets, housing and social services in comparison to the non-Roma population. It is therefore a common challenge to change the marginalized situation of Roma people. The policies and support programs of all the countries discussed in this book have similar aims and objectives due to the common strategy of Roma inclusion developed by the EU. However, the author states that even though there are certain improvements of the situation of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, the goal of Roma inclusion has yet to be fulfilled. The Roma minority still has limited access to education, labour, housing and healthcare and is confronted with discrimination and exclusion.

This book provides rich and structured information about the situation of the Roma minority in eight European countries and is an inspiring read for a broader scientific readership, including students at all levels. It also gives more advanced students from fields of social sciences and humanities a varied, handy overview and synthesis of recent research about Lifelong Learning and the Roma Minority in Central and Eastern Europe.

## **About the Reviewer**

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