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Use and misuse of data on Roma: A comment on the Salford on Roma migrants

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Mit: Mitteilungen der DGfE-Kommission
Vergleichende und Internationale
Erziehungswissenschaft

1'15

Sinti and Roma

- Warehouses and Window-Dressing: A Legal Perspective on Educational Segregation in Europe
- 'Roma Education' as a Lucrative Niche: Ideologies and Representations
- Romani pupils in Slovakia: Trapped between Romani and Slovak languages
- Reading Tales – an Informal Educational Practice for Social Change



1'15 ZEP

Education for All (EFA) is the widely known label of the global development consensus that has been established 15 years ago. Most countries in Europe have achieved EFA goals or are close to doing so and thus have seldom been a matter of concern. Looking beyond national averages, however, shows that certain populations are to a great extent excluded from quality education. A group especially vulnerable in this regard are Roma. Roma have lived in Europe for hundreds of years, are predominantly sedentary (contrary to popular perception) and in most countries a recognised national minority.

International surveys show a high degree of educational inequality when comparing Roma with majority populations. The provision of quality education for Roma has been defined as a key European policy priority since the launching of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005, with similar emphasis apparent in the 2011 EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. Since then, a wide range of approaches at international, national, and local level has emerged to improve the Roma's situation of education. However, at each level there is considerable variation in actors' views about what might work and how education should be organized. The various approaches have met with varying degrees of success in addressing the Roma's disadvantage in the area of education.

Helen O'Nions examines cases of educational segregation that were brought to the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights and found to violate the right to education in combination with the principle of non-discrimination. O'Nions shows that the segregation of Romani children and youth is likely to be discriminatory even if specialised segregated provision is defended as being in the

interests of the pupils and tailored to their needs. Similarly, the justification of segregated education with reference to parental consent does not preclude discriminatory treatment. Looking at subsequent developments in relation to the cases under consideration, O'Nions draws the conclusion that the rulings of the Grand Chamber, while consistent in their rejection of segregation, have failed to secure compliance on the part of governments.

Yaron Matras, Daniele Viktor Leggio and Mirela Steel scrutinise local approaches to the education of Romani migrants from Romania in Manchester. Their case study reveals how NGOs position themselves as education service providers between local authorities and Romani migrants. The authors examine how actors under constant pressure to secure project funding present Roma as a population in need of educational support. To this end, the actors develop educational approaches that – according to observations by Matras et al. – are selectively taken from international discourses on identity, culture and belonging rather than based on local needs.

Tina Gažovičová examines language policies in education in Slovakia. Looking at Romani students, she finds that the existence of language rights has not led to the realization of adequate language support. Gažovičová discusses several institutional barriers that complicate the use of the Romani language in the school context. Moreover, schools in Slovakia are not prepared to effectively teach students for whom Slovak is a second language. In the absence of systemically integrated interdisciplinary language support, learners who are labelled as having an insufficient command of the language of school instruction are channelled into preparatory classes or special schools which ultimately compromise their school success.

Laura Surdu and Furugh Switzer examine an intervention that targets early reading. Focusing on the project “Your Story”, which supported Romani mothers in developing reading skills and in using storybooks as educational tools, Surdu and Switzer analyse the experiences of project beneficiaries in Hungary. In addition to highlighting positive outcomes of the project such as improved attitudes towards learning, kindergarten attendance and post-compulsory education, the authors identify a set of challenges to the endeavour such as the training of facilitators and the inclusion of mothers as well as fathers who have severe difficulties in reading.

The contributions raise important questions and offer links for further research. The judgements of the Grand Chamber examined by O'Nions provide a broad normative framework against which persistent educational segregation could be analysed. Matras et al.'s findings can be taken as a call for a closer look at unintended effects of the ‘economy of Roma education’ that is often characterised by service outsourcing and short-term project funding. Gažovičová's analysis begs the broader question of how policies of long-term, interdisciplinary language support in inclusive settings could be designed and implemented. Finally, Surdu and Switzer point to a need to gain knowledge about how to support the most marginalized segments of a marginalized population, and – we might add – to move from claiming ‘best practice’ to also speaking openly about weaknesses and problems of policy interventions.

An interesting and informative read
Christian Brüggemann & Eben Friedmann

Berlin/Skopje, March 2015

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Use and misuse of data on Roma: A comment on the Salford study on Roma migrants

It is generally agreed that census data under-report Roma ethnicity. Several large-scale household surveys have examined social deprivation among Roma (e.g. FRA & UNDP 2012), but accurate data on the number of Roma in individual countries are still missing. The Council of Europe routinely cites a speculative range of 10–12 million Roma in Europe (see for example Council of Europe 2012), but targeted data collection on Roma often evokes associations of surveillance (cf. MG-S-ROM 2000): On the one hand, data might be necessary to monitor policies or to prove discrimination. On the other hand, there is a risk that open discussion of data (and migrant population estimates especially) might trigger expressions of fear, hostility and xenophobia.

The rationale of recent work by a team based at the Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford (UK) is that data on Roma migrants are useful in order to underline the need for resources to support them. Having previously examined planning issues in Traveller sites in Britain, the team was invited by Migration Yorkshire, a consortium of local authority and voluntary sector agencies, to partake in a small-scale survey of attitudes toward Roma (cf. Brown et al. 2012). They were then commissioned by the Black Health Agency, a Manchester-based charity, to assess an EU-funded project on Roma migrants by interviewing those who commissioned the assessment, i.e. the funding beneficiaries themselves. The key finding was that “it was difficult to argue for additional financial resources to provide support to communities when they were unable to accurately state the size of the population they were required to support” (Scullion/Brown 2013, p. 42). So in October 2013 the team released a report with the aim of providing “hard data about the number of migrant Roma” (Brown et al. 2013, p. 6).

The team sent questionnaires to 406 local authorities across the UK and asked them to estimate the number of Roma migrants in their localities. They received a total of 151 responses, of which only 51 (ca. 12 % of those targeted) provided a number. The identity of the respondents is not disclosed in the report “to ensure anonymity” (ibid., p. 14). The report also refrains from specifying which services the respondents represented, which kind of data on ethnicity was available to the respondents, how frequently and in what capacity respondents had contact with Roma, or indeed which criteria the respondents employed to identify Roma. The latter is important given the confusion in terminology in the UK, where institutions often use the wholesale label ‘Gypsy/Roma/Travellers’. Practitioners also routinely confuse ‘Roma’ with ‘Romanian’ and

many are unaware of particular identifiers of Roma such as language. No information is provided as to which local authorities responded (except for a breakdown by region and type of authority) and it is reported that many based their responses on information obtained from others (cf. ibid., p. 25–27), limiting comparability even further. The authors even withhold the actual estimates that they received from the respondents.

Several layers of opacity thus render the data inaccessible and unverifiable. Instead, the authors deliver their own estimate of the total number of Roma migrants in the UK: First, they take the figures provided by the respondents at face value. Second, they report that, using a statistical method to profile the respondents’ communities on the basis of “a series of demographic indicators” listed in an appendix, they “scaled up” the data by predicting the “potential location and size of Roma communities elsewhere” (ibid., p. 29). On this basis, the authors estimate “at least 197,705 migrant Roma” in the UK (ibid., p. 7). Predictably, they conclude that there is “a strong demand from local authorities for help in working with migrant Roma communities.” (ibid., p. 45).

The team took some rather unusual steps to give their message publicity: Lead author Phillip Brown gave an “exclusive” interview on national television on 30 October 2013, and a group of parliamentarians was lobbied to table a motion in which they described the study as “pioneering research”. As if flagging the estimate as “conservative” wasn’t enough, the authors added that “it is likely that this population will continue to increase” as a result of the relaxation of employment restrictions on citizens of Romania and Bulgaria, due to take effect in January 2014, within two months of publication (ibid., p. 7). Unsurprisingly, for several weeks immediately following the release of the report, UK media and politicians used the study to warn of a danger of an uncontrolled ‘influx’ of immigrants. Some targeted Roma directly, accusing them of ‘intimidating behaviour’ and insisting that their presence in UK cities triggered insurmountable problems.

We now know that there was no major influx in January 2014. But there are several lessons to be learned from the Salford study. First, it shows the risks of abstract projections. The Salford team did not speak to Roma and they had no tools with which to predict their settlement patterns and so no real instrument with which to fill the gaps left by a low rate of unreliable responses. ‘Big Data’ analyses offer statistical correlations as a substitute for qualitative interpretation of causal relations (cf. Mayer-Schönberger/Cukler 2013), but they require transparency, which the Salford study lacks. Finally, the study was

apparently intended to assist an interest group of voluntary sector practitioners to lobby for resources, and for this reason it was 'marketed' rather aggressively. But the strategy backfired, for the Roma became the scapegoats. The authors' later reference to 'media hysteria' notwithstanding (cf. Brown et al. 2014, p. 30), the Salford study clearly illustrates the risks of producing and marketing estimates in this way.

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