
“A STARTING POINT” THE CONTRIBUTION OF A SECONDARY GRAMMAR SCHOOL OF THE ROMANY ETHNIC MINORITY TO LIFELONG LEARNING¹

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INTRODUCTION

Today the most essential requirement of lifelong learning in Hungary is to graduate from high-school, obviously attainable during secondary education. The present study investigates the results of the Second Chance Department of Gandhi Secondary Grammar School, Pécs. The uniqueness of this institution is unquestionable, considering that it was founded as the very first Romany ethnic minority nationality secondary grammar school in Europe. Myself, the author of this study have been working there as a teacher of English for nearly ten years.

This paper attempts to study some basic questions concerning the educational challenges of the Romany living in Hungary. First I provide a brief historical review of the nationality status and the basic characteristics of this sector of the population, and I point out the specifics of the Southern Transdanubian Region of Hungary. Then I study the educational index of the Romany at the beginning of the 1990s, underlining the importance of secondary education. Next I outline the institutions of secondary education that focus on the social integration of the Romany ethnic minority in the Southern Transdanubian Region of Hungary. Finally I summarise the results of a questionnaire that was filled in by students graduating in 2007 from the Second Chance Department of Gandhi Secondary Grammar School and I point out the findings of a series of interviews that I carried out between November, 2006 and March, 2007 with teachers and graduated students of the institution. We see the ways the school reacts to the real needs of its target group by giving them a chance to integrate socially and a starting point for lifelong learning.

¹ This paper introduces the basic findings of the M.Ph. thesis of the author, see Dezső (2007).

CONSIDERABLE ISSUES

Romany in Hungary

There are several debates on when exactly the Romany first settled in Hungary² but the fact that we have been living together for hundreds of years is unquestionable. The date July 7th, 1993 is a milestone in the history of the Romany in our country as this was the day when the Hungarian Parliament passed the Law on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities including the Romany people. A legislative solution itself only probably remains a piece of paper if relevant actions do not follow it. Prejudice or fear of the unknown cannot be stopped by means of law. This is why emphasising the extreme importance of education is undoubtedly significant. From the date July 7th, 1993, in a very spectacular effort, Hungary's Gypsies started to prove that besides other national minorities (e. g. German, Croat) the Romany are able to establish their own educational institutions.

It is extremely dangerous to generalise the characteristics of a national ethnic minority—still, referring to a recent study (Babusik, 2007) the following criteria are overrepresented in the case of the majority of Romany living in Hungary. In spite of high fertility rates, due to extremely high mortality rates of the Romany their average expected lifetime is 10 years less than that of the majority of the population. Poor markers of health and poverty factors, together with the significant rate of unemployment, exclude the Romany from our society. Specifics of regional disadvantages and lack of quality education also add to the challenges relevant policy makers have to face.

The Southern Transdanubian Region of Hungary

This region has been one of the most backward parts of Hungary for almost two decades now. (Cserti 2003: 97) summarises the effects of the most significant negative processes, the economical crises after the political changes in Hungary in the early 1990s.

The collapse of coal mining of Mecsek Hills and the mouldering of timber companies transfigured the everyday life of people living in the region. Economical challenges had their effects on the education of this part of the country as well. Vocational schools, the “first step institutions” of Romany social mobility remained with occupations that no longer had a real economy market value. The special structure

² Crowe, D. M. (1994).

of settlements in Southern Transdanubia (i.e. very small, remote villages with high representation of Romany inhabitants) also intensified the process of exclusion.

A foreign political issue, the war in Yugoslavia and its negative economical consequences added to the regional challenge. Consuming and trading Croats disappeared from both legal and illegal markets of this part of the country.

Those who had a slight chance for a change in the labour market moved away from the region—the ones that stayed are those who are marginalised: most of them Romany without any perspective of conforming to the EU. The flow of the labour force for these people without relevant skills, occupation and the lack of information remains nothing but a distant image.

Educational Index of the Romany in Hungary in 1993

There is research outcome evidence (Table 1) that proves what an urgent issue the education of the Romany was right after the political changes of the 1990s—and the challenge is still there.

Table 1. Educational Index of the Romany Living in Hungary in 1993 (%)

Age	No school	Unfinished primary	Completed primary	Vocational secondary	Secondary w/ GCSE	College
14- 19	1,5	32,4	55,3	10,4	0,4	0,0
20- 29	1,7	22,4	59,7	14,5	1,7	0,0
30- 39	4,6	32,5	47,4	12,5	2,5	0,3
40- 49	10,1	39,7	40,8	7,4	1,4	0,6
50- 59	32,0	42,3	20,5	3,7	1,4	0,2
60- 69	39,6	51,2	6,4	2,1	0,4	0,4
70-	50,9	40,2	7,8	1,0	0,0	0,0

Source: Kemény – Havas – Kertesi (1997).

In the year of the research, of the studied population the age group below 30 did not participate in higher education at all. The highest percentage of Romany with a college or university degree was 0.6% among the 40-49 age range. The most typical education was the eight completed primary classes among the age group 14-49. Completed vocational training was highest (14.5%) among 20-29 year olds, whereas those who graduated from school were almost not represented at all. Romany aged 30-39 had the most significant representation amongst those who completed secondary grammar education—still the highest rank in their case means 2.5%.

Why Secondary Grammar Schools?

It is fashionable and always modern to talk about lifelong learning and equal chances. In Hungary if one cannot complete a secondary school that gives him or her GSCE—most vocational schools do not give the chance of that—than the person is almost a hundred per cent lost in the labour market. As a well known Hungarian economist suggests (Kertesi, 2005), secondary education offering a graduation (“A levels”) is a cut off point between those—both Romany and non-Romany (!)—who will always be left behind and those who get a chance to integrate as useful members of our society.

Adult Education

The challenge of teaching the mature has several specific features. The learning disabilities of most adults derive from the failures they have been through during their learning experience. In most cases they simply have not been taught how to study, they have not enjoyed success and therefore they lack motivation. Absence of time adds to the condition in that a significant number of adult learners drop out.

Though education itself cannot solve the problems of social deprivation, discrimination or poverty it can contribute to alleviate them. Belonging to the disadvantaged is basically a heredity condition (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990); however, positive learning patterns also become models of the second generation of those who learn as adults. Reproduction of this kind is a considerably significant issue, especially concerning the groups living on the periphery of our societies.

Three Model Institutions of Secondary Education that Focus on the Social Integration of the Romany Ethnic National Minority in the Southern Transdanubian Region of Hungary

In spite of regional challenges, today this part of the country has become the platform of the most significant educational centres for the Romany people. Table 2 introduces these institutions from certain significant perspectives.³

The first cocoon, still the only Romany ethnic minority secondary grammar school both in Hungary and throughout Europe, is the Gandhi⁴ Secondary Grammar and Boarding School, located in Pécs. This school started its work in February 1994,

³ A possible explanation of the connection among these institutions is the next step of the author's project.

⁴ The school received its name from Mahatma Gandhi, who is a symbol of passive disobedience. The connection with India is due to the common belief according to which the Romany migrated to Europe from there.

offering a six and a half year long education with boarding facilities for students aged 12. Some years' experience confirmed that at such an early age it is difficult for both the children and their families to stay away from one another, so the leadership of the school introduced a new structure. Today teenagers of 14 or 15 start a four or five year long secondary education at Gandhi. In the early days the school was run by a private foundation compiled by mostly liberal individuals, but after a few years the government recognised the importance of the institution and became its supporter. In 1995 the private foundation became a public one.

Not that much later, two years after Gandhi had been operating, in 1996, a new educational centre was established in the romantic settlement of Mánfa. Collegium Martineum offers boarding facilities to Romany students who are completing their secondary education—either grammar or vocational—at different non-minority schools of the region, mostly in Komló and Pécs. This institution started with the help of the Soros foundation and annually gives boarding facilities to around 50 students.

Table 2. Pioneer Educational Institutions of the Romany of the Southern Transdanubian Region in Hungary

Name of the institution/ department	Gandhi Secondary Grammar and Boarding School	Second Chance Department of Gandhi Secondary Grammar School	Collegium Martineum	Small Tiger Vocational and Secondary Grammar School
Target group	12/14+	18+	14+	14+/18+
Type of institution	"First Chance", education and boarding	Second Chance, education mostly, boarding possible	"First chance", boarding	Second chance education "at the scene"
Number of students (approx/average)	220	200	50	120
Classes started in	February, 1994	September, 2002	September, 1996	September, 2004
Ran/supported by	Public Foundation (background institution of the HMEC)	Public Foundation (background institution of the HMEC)	Soros Foundation	"The Gate of the Doctrine" Buddhist Church

Sources: www.gimn-gandhi.hu, www.kistigris.hu, www.collegiummartineum.hu

**Hungarian Ministry of Education and Culture*

Considering the marginalised educational situation of the Romany (Table 2) five years ago, in September 2002 Gandhi launched a department for adults, the Second Chance Department of the Gandhi Secondary Grammar School. The number of students graduating from this department is growing year by year (Table 3), in the first year of graduation (2004) being 22, whereas at the latest exam (2007) 59 people passed their school-leaving exams. The department is open to non Romany candidates as well, the rate of Romany and non Romany students is approximately 50%-50%, meaning about 200 people altogether at different grades.

Table 3. Adult Students Who Obtained GCSE at Gandhi Secondary Grammar School

School year	2003/2004	2005/2006	2006/2007
Number of Students	22	34	59

Source: Dezső (2007).

The Small Tiger (Kistigris) Vocational and Secondary Grammar School is also a unique educational experiment. Run by the Hungarian Buddhist Church, The Gate of the Doctrine (Tan Kapuja), the institution can be found at several locations. Its original idea was to educate Romany “in situ”, in the small villages where they live. Today, besides Pettend, Alsószentmárton, Sellye and Gilvánfa students can also attend classes in larger settlements, such as Komló and Pécs. The number of the students is constantly growing, the target group of the institution is the Romany population both under and above 18⁵, who previously have faced failures at school.

The three patterns are models that do not compete in the relevant educational field but complement one another. The existence of similar institutions in other regions, especially in the North East of Hungary, is more than desirable and is an urging challenge for Hungarian policy makers.

RECENT RESEARCH RESULTS AT THE SECOND CHANCE DEPARTMENT OF GANDHI SECONDARY GRAMMAR SCHOOL, PÉCS

The Goal of the Research

The Second Chance Department of the school started only five years ago. Between November, 2006 and April, 2007 I carried out research on the integrative role of and the innovative educational methods applied at the Second Chance Department of

⁵ Official age of entry into majority in Hungary.

Gandhi Secondary Grammar School. My supposition was that there is connection between the innovative educational methods that are being used during the teaching-learning process and the integration being realised at the department. Additionally, my goal was to demonstrate that it was well worth challenging the traditionally widespread, mainly frontal teaching techniques in Hungary during the process of the education of disadvantaged target groups of learners.

In order to underpin my premise I applied two basic methods. I constructed a questionnaire of 27 questions that was answered by the graduating students of the department, and carried out seven in-depth interviews—two of which were pair interviews—among the teachers and students who had already graduated in earlier school years.

The Questionnaire Survey

96% of the graduating evening and correspondence classes of the department filled out the questionnaire after having completed their autumn semester exams in January, 2007. They answered questions about their sex, age, ethnicity, primary studies, financial circumstances, occupation and habitation. I also required information on their recent studies: their motivation, the reason they chose this particular school, their information source on the existence of the institution, the type of classes (evening or correspondence) they attend, their future plans concerning possible further studies and likely acceptance on positive changes regarding their position in the labour market. One third of the questions investigated the informants' prejudices and personal contribution to social integration and inclusion. While processing data I compared the results I had compiled with those of a nationwide survey (Mayer, 2007).

Roughly half of the contributors were aged 20-30, one third of them 30-40 and nearly 15% above 40, more than two thirds of the students being women. These rates correspond with the nationwide data (Mayer, 2007: 77-78). Although generally in Hungary "the secondary education of adults essentially takes place in the schools of people living in towns and cities" (Mayer, 2007: 76), at the studied department the percentage of villagers is over 40%. Of the Romany students, 100% live in villages, meaning that those who come from the furthest distances are Romany, sacrificing the greatest amount of money and time for the sake of their secondary education.

Among those who graduated in 2007, 40.68% of the students identified themselves as Romany. The indicators of occupation are not ethno-specific. The schooling of the

informants' parents is according to data discussed above, and the Romany are more disadvantaged in this respect. Also, considering their financial circumstances the Romany are somewhat poorer than the others. Bearing these differences in mind the social status of the informants does not differ as regards their ethnicity to an extent that would enable them to participate in personal interactions.

As for the motivation of education, the findings of the survey harmonise with one of the basic messages of this paper. Most of the informants know that they do not have a chance either to continue their studies or occupy reasonable places in the labour market—this is why they have decided to complete their secondary grammar education. 45.8% of the students chose this particular school because they had heard about its student-friendly education.

80% of the contributors declared that they had become friends with their fellow students of different ethnic origin. There was only one informant who clearly mentioned her previously existing prejudice about the Romany (“being aggressive, dirty and loud”). I concluded from some control questions that other forms of prejudice had been present before starting the classes, such as “they do not fight to getting any further”, “there is not a decent one among them”, “they are not able to study”, “they do not have goals”, “they are not diligent”, “they do not help one another or others”, “it is just not good to be among them”, “intolerance against them is not without reason”—“they” and “them” meaning the Romany.

As the Second Chance Department of the Gandhi Secondary Grammar School is a unique scenario of educating together the members of the majority of the society (Hungarians) with the Romany it is a potential bridge institution of social inclusion and cohesion. It is a place to create mutual understanding and acceptance (see Summary of Results for examples) through creating a setting of common personal interaction during the process of education and offering opportunities for shared experience outside the building of the institution as well. Examining the results of the interviews, we are to see fabulous examples of how these cross-nationality relationships can remain after achieving the most important joint goal: passing the school-leaving exam.

Interviews

Methodologically the interviews I applied were semi-structured individual or paired in-depth interviews. While processing them I intended to clarify the social

background and the attitudes towards teaching or learning of my informants, and discover the issues concerning my supposition (see Research Goal).

I asked ten persons related to the institution to talk to me, nine of whom did contribute to my survey (Table 4). It is well worth mentioning that among the colleagues interviewed one woman has more than ten years of adult education experience in other institutions as well, whereas two young teachers were among the pioneers who first graduated in 2000 at Gandhi Secondary Grammar and Boarding School .

Table 4. Interviews

Interviewee	Sex	Age	Status	Ethnicity
1.	Female	48	ex student	Hungarian
2.	Female	33	teacher	Hungarian
3.	Female	48	teacher	Hungarian
4.	Female	28	ex student	Romany/Gypsy
5.	Female	46	ex student	Hungarian
6.	Female	34	ex student	Romany/Gypsy
7.	Male	32	ex student	Romany/Gypsy
8.	Male	26	teacher	Romany/Gypsy
9.	Male	25	teacher	Romany/Gypsy

Source: Dezső (2007).

The information I attained from the interviews reinforced the data I had obtained from the questionnaires. I required similar information from the teachers and the students so that I could control one with the other but I have not found any significant contradiction among the replies. Irrespective of the status of the informant I achieved similar information on various subjects that interested me.

Teachers' views

Each of my interviewees agreed that the work being done at the department can be carried out only and only if one is "stout-hearted", free of prejudice, open-minded both professionally and in terms of social sensitivity, hard working and devoted to the educational goals of the department. The staff is described as a group of enthusiastic teachers who "go after the students" in the case of permanent truancy or lack of presence at exams occurs. They talk to these clients and also to their families to encourage and persuade them of the importance of their studies. The presence of Romany teachers of languages and culture is also significant.

Compared to similar programmes at other educational institutions, the students at the department are older than elsewhere. Whereas at other institutions students are below or around twenty years of age, whose studies are paid by their parents, at the department in question at Gandhi students start school after having arrived at a mature individual decision, realising the importance of having the school-leaving qualification. Neither can the age group of students over 40 be considered “hobby learners”, as many of those have gone on to study at a variety of university faculties. Regardless of their ethnicity, students’ social background is more disadvantageous than at other second chance secondary grammar schools. The ethnicity of students in several cases remains uncertain for various reasons, and so the idea of altering learning techniques related to diverse ethnic groups does not even become aired.

Real educational practice underpins the basic institutional concept, that is, what is typical is not the hope to achieve a sophisticated, knowledge based information transfer, but a skill-centred, practical schooling (see Summary of Results for examples). According to my colleagues, the most significant achievements of the department are the relatively low rate of drop-out students, a significant number of students who continue their studies in higher education and last but not least mutual understanding, social integration and inclusion among the participants of the programme.

Ex-students’ opinions

Most students who started their studies in the first year of the department chose the school for quite practical reasons. Exclusively for them, a two-year course was available if they took evening classes—this opportunity never occurred afterwards. Most students of the following school years applied to the department because the first inmates were spreading its good reputation all over the region.

Interestingly enough, some of my interviewees, all of whom are Romany, came to study with an acquaintance or relative. As they said, sharing the experience of learning eased the process of their education. Later, after graduation, it was these people who tended to continue their studies in higher education together with their ex-classmates. As they said they simply felt more secure this way.

Two of my interviewees told me that they had attained second chance education previously elsewhere, but at those institutions they faced failures due to the traditional subject-structured education, teaching techniques and evaluation methods. They also

noticed that their schoolmates at other institutions were “younger and frivolous who were more interested in partying and fashion than in their studies”.

In most cases, the immediate environment of my Romany informants had a hostile attitude towards their educational intentions. “A secondary grammar school for you? What for?” “You won’t become anything, anyway...” “You won’t get any further for sure...” This is how these socially disadvantaged students were “encouraged” by their relatives and fellow countrymen. And this is only some of the price the individual has to pay when he or she tries to make efforts towards social mobility. The positive example however infected the neighbourhood in some cases: some relatives and friends applied either to the department or to different locations of the Small Tiger Vocational and Secondary Grammar School.

Those who came to the department from the majority (Hungarian part) of society also experienced negative attitudes of their acquaintance, most of it criticism of the Romany ethnic minority characteristics of the school, probably due to their prejudices. One of the biggest achievements of the department concerning social inclusion is that several of those who had had these negative preconceptions in their minds, later, after having heard positive experiences regarding the atmosphere and everyday life of the school became students of it themselves. All of my interviewees said that they had made friends with schoolmates belonging to other ethnicity.

Summary of Results

Both integration and innovation have significant indicators at the studied institution. From the interviews and the questionnaires I have processed I found evidence, described in the previous chapters, that I had been correct in my supposition, i.e. that there is connection between the innovative educational methods that are being used during the teaching-learning process and the integration being realised at the Second Chance Department of Gandhi Secondary Grammar School.

Concerning integration I found the indicators below the most significant:

- Equal representation of Romany and non-Romany students;
- Establishing close personal relationships between different ethnicities—each of the followings done together (!):
 - free time activities;
 - self-organised study circles after school;
 - planning and achieving enrolment in higher education;

- helping each other in taking up positions in the labour market;
- Altering prejudice among students;
- Modifying prejudice of students' micro-economies (family members, friends, etc);
- Changing negative attitudes towards different ethnicities;
- Involving members of students' micro-economies in the teaching-learning process of the department—in this way spreading successful integration.

Besides integrative indicators the most innovative factors of the school can be summarised, too. The most important ones are:

- innovation of subjects and methods;
- introducing new modules, blocks of subjects (e.g. social science versus history),
- a locally developed subject: Romany studies;
- trainings on methodology of learning each term;
- study help developed by teachers (e. g. guides on how to use books);
- requirements during the terms (versus end of term evaluation only);
- methods of student requirements (projects, net-surfing);
- using ICT in education;
- pair and group work of students;
- inbuilt extracurricular activities (Romany festival, visiting museums, film appreciation);
- personal qualities of teachers (empathy, openness, energy, patience);
- presence of highly qualified Romany teachers;
- co-operation in innovative nationwide projects.

My results concerning innovation support Halász, who points out that educational institutions dealing with challenging target groups tend to be the most successful ones as their motivation is driven by their own failures and experience (Order and Disorder, 2003).

The outcomes of my study also justify Balázs's findings (2003: 46), which suggest that geographic structures of innovativeness of schools do not follow the social-economic development of a region. Though Gandhi Secondary Grammar School is located in one of the most backward areas of Hungary, its educational instruments are still considerably innovative.

FINAL REMARKS

2007 is proclaimed to be European Union's Year of Equal Opportunities, while the decade between 2005 and 2015 is devoted to Romany integration. This is the time to carry out research on relevant issues, such as the integration and lifelong learning of the Romany. There is lack of reliable, well-constructed studies that would enable decision makers of education policy to focus more closely on one particular model institution. Action in this field for and with Romany people is essential in today's Hungary. I believe that the research I have carried out can be interpreted as an information base through which relevant education policies will prove to be justifiable.

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