



BABEȘ BOLYAI UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA

Faculty of Sociology and Social Work
Doctoral School of Sociology

SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

Roma access to higher education in Romania. Educational trajectories
of Roma students

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In Romanian academic literature, research on Roma education has focused predominantly on pre-university education (Moisa & Roth, 2011; Rostas, 2012; Vasile et al., 2020), while the experiences of Roma students in higher education have received comparatively limited attention. As a result, an important segment of the Roma population has remained insufficiently represented in academic discourse.

In this context, the motivation for the present research is twofold. On the one hand, it has a scientific dimension, aiming to contribute to filling this gap in the Romanian literature. On the other hand, it has a social dimension, driven by the desire to highlight the experiences of those who have succeeded in accessing higher education, but whose educational trajectories and challenges have remained largely underexplored. Accordingly, this dissertation seeks to examine what it means to be a Roma student in Romania by identifying the barriers, resources, and sacrifices that have facilitated access to and completion of university studies. The need for such research is further supported by the international literature, which identifies three key dimensions in the analysis of Roma students' experiences: access to education, integration into the academic environment, and the effectiveness of support programmes (D'Arcy & Galloway, 2018; Forster et al., 2020; Mulcahy et al., 2017; J. Morgan et al., 2026).

However, in Romania, despite the contributions of scholars and the interventions implemented by national and international organizations, access to quality education remains limited for the Roma population (Pentea-Pop, 2024). The persistence of structural marginalization (Mocanu & Chirugu, 2024) and deep poverty (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2025) continues to negatively affect the educational trajectories of Roma children and young people.

Drawing on quantitative data collected from institutional sources and questionnaire surveys, as well as qualitative data obtained through interviews with Roma graduates and experts, the dissertation examines both access to education and the influence of socio-economic and cultural factors on university trajectories. The study is based on the premise that higher education constitutes a key mechanism of social inclusion. At the individual level, it facilitates social mobility (Garaz & Torotcoi, 2017; Rogers, 2021), increases access to stable and well-paid employment, and contributes to the consolidation of socio-economic status (A.-M. Zamfir et al., 2024).

At the collective level, graduates can become agents of social change within their communities of origin, contributing to the reduction of inequalities and the promotion of social inclusion (Anderson et al., 2018). In the same vein, Flecha (2014) argues that increasing the number of

Roma graduates is a fundamental instrument in combating social exclusion, as they can support community development and strengthen civic participation.

This dissertation is structured into six chapters. The first chapter establishes the theoretical framework of the research and is organized into four complementary sections. The first section defines the concept of social inequality and delineates the relationship between social and educational inequalities (Ringen, 2006). Drawing on the theory of educational stratification (Boudon, 1974), it examines the primary and secondary effects of educational inequalities, highlighting how social origin influences both academic performance and decisions regarding the continuation of education (Shavit et al., 2007). The chapter also presents contemporary developments of this theoretical perspective, which incorporate ethnicity, gender, and religion as relevant factors in the production and reproduction of educational inequalities (Strand, 2015; Stopforth et al., 2024).

The chapter also incorporates social reproduction theory, explaining how inequalities are transmitted across generations through economic resources, cultural capital, and everyday interactions within the school environment (Heath, 1983; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; J. Collins, 2009). In this context, cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986) explains the mechanisms through which cultural resources acquired within the family are converted into educational achievement and, subsequently, into socio-economic status. From the perspective of Althusser (1971) and Bourdieu and Passeron (2000), schools are analysed as institutions that reproduce existing social structures by valuing the culture of dominant social groups. The chapter concludes with an overview of the intersectional perspective, which highlights how ethnicity, social class, gender, disability, and language interact and overlap in the production of educational inequalities (Codioli McMaster & Cook, 2019; Keller et al., 2024).

The second chapter applies this theoretical framework to the analysis of educational inequalities affecting the Roma community and is structured into four sections. The first section presents the educational disparities that exist across all levels of schooling, highlighting high rates of school dropout and functional illiteracy, as well as the pronounced educational vulnerability of Roma girls (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016, 2023; Jovanovic, 2018). The second section examines the relationship between social exclusion, poverty, and educational participation, arguing that poverty is not merely a disadvantaged social context but a structural mechanism that reproduces educational inequalities (Vincze & Harbula, 2011).

This section also examines the effects of racism, anti-Gypsyism, and Romaphobia on the educational trajectories of Roma students. It presents data indicating an increase in the perception of discrimination within the education system, from 7% in 2016 to 14% in 2024 (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2025), as well as findings from qualitative studies highlighting experiences of harassment, stigmatization, and marginalization that discourage the continuation of education (Fremlova et al., 2014; Forster et al., 2020). The section further analyses the growing phenomenon of school segregation and the disproportionate placement of Roma children in special schools based on culturally biased intelligence tests (Rostas, 2012; Albert et al., 2015; Alexandru, 2018).

Chapter Three examines the legislative framework and educational policies relevant to Roma access to education and is structured into five sections. The first section clarifies the distinction between *social integration* and *social inclusion*, highlighting that integration involves the adaptation of individuals to existing social structures, whereas inclusion seeks to eliminate the structural barriers that generate exclusion and to ensure the equitable participation of all individuals in social life (Woolcock, 1998; Levitas et al., 2007). This conceptual distinction underpins the argument that policies targeting vulnerable groups should be oriented toward inclusion rather than merely integration.

The second section examines the national legislative framework, with a particular focus on the provisions of National Education Law No. 1/2011 and the Pre-University Education Law No. 198/2023. The analysis highlights the principles of equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and equity, emphasizing that equity involves providing differentiated support to groups in situations of vulnerability in order to ensure genuine access to education (Maguire, 2016; Claiborne, 2023). The section also analyzes the principle of inclusive education, enshrined in Article 67 of Law No. 198/2023, which explicitly recognizes Roma as a vulnerable group and establishes the state's responsibility to remove structural barriers within the education system.

The third section examines the phenomenon of school segregation in Romania, identifying poverty, residential segregation, and institutional racism, including the *white flight* phenomenon, as its main driving factors. It highlights the contradictions between the normative framework, which prohibits school segregation through Order No. 6134/2016, and the educational reality in which segregation continues to undermine Roma children's access to quality education.

The final section examines affirmative action measures concerning state-funded places reserved for Roma pupils and students, introduced in 1992 and subsequently regulated under Article 205 of Law No. 1/2011. The analysis highlights the role of these measures in compensating for the historical and structural disadvantages faced by the Roma community, while also addressing the debates they have generated, particularly regarding their perception as forms of “reverse discrimination” (Sarău, 2012; Coşmeleată et al., 2023).

Chapter 4 presents the mixed-methods research design, grounded in the pragmatic paradigm (Creswell, 2013; Maggetti, 2020), which combines the quantitative analysis of secondary data with primary data and qualitative methods in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of Roma students’ access to and trajectories within higher education.

The quantitative component of the research comprises three studies. Study 1 provides a descriptive-comparative analysis of data from the 2011 and 2021 population censuses in order to assess changes in the educational attainment of Roma people in comparison with other ethnic groups. Study 2 uses data from the National Institute of Statistics and the Ministry of Education (2013-2022) to identify critical educational transition points at which significant losses occur (Mare, 1981; Surdu et al., 2011). Study 3 tests five hypotheses related to discrimination, school safety, motivation, self-efficacy, and university dropout, based on a sociological survey administered to 198 students, including 60 Roma students.

The qualitative component of the research comprises two studies. Study 4 investigates the experiences of 16 Roma graduates through life-story interviews (Goodson, 2016; Jovanovic, 2018), exploring experiences of discrimination, material hardships, and the role of parents and teachers in shaping their educational trajectories. Study 5 examines the perspectives of 10 education experts (5 Roma and 5 non-Roma) through semi-structured interviews, focusing on structural barriers, racism, and the evaluation of affirmative action policies.

The research received ethical approval from the Doctoral School of Sociology at Babeş-Bolyai University, and all data were collected in accordance with ethical principles, including anonymization, informed consent, and compliance with GDPR regulations. The acknowledged limitations of the study include the limited representativeness of the samples, the difficulty of identifying Roma students, the lack of systematic data at the higher education level, the reliance on self-reported information, and the potential influence of recall bias and social desirability bias.

Chapter 5 presents the empirical findings of the five studies. Study 1, based on data from the 2011 and 2021 population censuses, shows that although the rate of higher education attainment among Roma increased from 1.14% in 2011 to 3.17% in 2021, it remains approximately six times lower than the average recorded among other ethnic groups. The intersectional analysis reveals that Roma men living in rural areas constitute the most disadvantaged group, with only 0.9% holding a higher education degree. This finding challenges earlier research that identified Roma girls as the more vulnerable group (Surdu & Surdu, 2006) and supports the conclusions reported by Edupedu (2022).

Study 2, based on data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (INS) and the Ministry of Education, presents the number of Roma pupils and students enrolled in the education system between 2013 and 2022, including Roma students who applied for the quota places reserved for Roma applicants at the undergraduate level. The findings show that social sciences were the most frequently chosen fields of study during the 2018-2024 period. The study identifies two critical educational transitions: a loss of approximately 24,600 Roma pupils between primary and lower secondary education, and a decline of more than 80% in the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary education, confirming the theoretical model proposed by Surdu et al. (2011). At the university level, Roma students account for only 0.07% to 0.16% of the total student population, and those who apply through the Roma quota system enroll predominantly in social science programmes, which represent more than 50% of all enrollments.

Study 3 examines the educational experiences of Roma and non-Roma students, as well as the factors influencing integration and academic success in higher education. The study was conducted on a sample of 198 students, including 60 Roma and 138 non-Roma students, drawn from several universities across Romania. The findings reveal significant differences between the two groups. Among Roma students, 55% come from rural areas, compared to less than 25% of non-Roma students. Moreover, more than half of all respondents originating from rural areas are of Roma ethnicity.

The first hypothesis of the study posited that Roma students were exposed to higher levels of discrimination in pre-university education. The results confirm this hypothesis. The highest levels of discrimination were reported during lower secondary education, where 30% of Roma students indicated experiences of discrimination by teachers, compared to 11.6% of non-Roma students. Similar differences were observed in relations with peers (28.3% versus 16.7%). Regression analysis shows that Roma ethnicity is a significant predictor of discrimination

experiences ($\beta = 0.25$, $p = 0.01$), while a disadvantaged financial situation further increases the likelihood of such experiences ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.001$). The model explains approximately 15% of the variance in reported discrimination experiences ($R^2 = 0.15$).

The second hypothesis examined the factors influencing students' sense of safety during high school. Although no significant differences were identified between Roma and non-Roma students regarding their relationships with teachers or peers, the results indicate that the sense of safety is primarily determined by the quality of social relationships. The full model explains 70% of the variance in students' sense of safety ($R^2 = 0.70$). The strongest predictor is the quality of relationships with peers ($\beta = 0.42$; $p < 0.001$), followed by relationships with teachers ($\beta = 0.21$; $p < 0.001$) and the absence of discrimination ($\beta = 0.16$; $p < 0.001$). Ethnic background does not have a statistically significant direct effect on students' sense of safety.

The third hypothesis examined motivation for pursuing higher education studies. Both Roma and non-Roma students are primarily motivated by extrinsic factors, such as professional and economic prospects. However, Roma students report higher levels of intrinsic motivation. For example, 70% of Roma students stated that they pursued higher education for the pleasure of learning, compared to 46.4% of non-Roma students ($p = 0.05$). In addition, teachers had a significantly greater influence on the decision to attend university among Roma students (50% compared to 31.2%; $p = 0.03$). Regression analyses indicate that the relationship with teachers is the strongest predictor of intrinsic motivation ($\beta = 0.35$; $p < 0.001$).

The fourth hypothesis examined the factors influencing academic self-efficacy. The results indicate that socioeconomic factors play a limited role, whereas academic skills emerge as the main predictors of confidence in passing examinations. The full model explains 54% of the variance in academic self-efficacy ($R^2 = 0.54$). The strongest predictor is the ability to take effective notes ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$), followed by comprehension of course materials ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$). Among Roma students, family financial status remains a significant predictor of academic self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.35$, $p = 0.01$).

The final hypothesis investigated the factors associated with students' intention to drop out of university. The results indicate that socio-economic variables do not significantly influence thoughts of withdrawing from higher education. In contrast, academic support ($\beta = -0.26$; $p < 0.001$) and support provided by professors ($\beta = -0.23$; $p < 0.001$) significantly reduce the likelihood of considering university dropout. Surprisingly, Roma students report a lower likelihood of considering dropping out of university compared to non-Roma students ($\beta =$

-0.17; $p = 0.03$). The full model explains approximately 20% of the variation in dropout intentions ($R^2 = 0.20$).

Study 4 explores the educational experiences of 16 Roma higher education graduates through *life story* interviews. The analysis examines the influence of family background, school experiences, discrimination, and support resources on access to and success in higher education. The findings show that 12 of the 16 participants are first-generation students, being the first members of their families to graduate from university. Most participants graduated in the social sciences and humanities, particularly in Social Work (7 cases), while five graduates completed more than one university degree program.

Experiences of discrimination and segregation were present in most of the biographies analyzed. Three participants attended segregated schools, and numerous respondents reported experiences of stigmatization and differential treatment from both peers and teachers. At the same time, 12 of the 16 graduates described significant material hardships throughout their educational trajectories, including a lack of financial resources and the need to work while studying. Family and school played a central role in educational success. In 14 cases, parents were identified as the primary source of moral and motivational support, while almost all participants highlighted at least one teacher who had made a significant contribution to their decision to continue their education. Nevertheless, only two graduates used the special places reserved for Roma students when applying to university.

Most participants described the university environment as more inclusive and less discriminatory than pre-university education, although some experiences of discrimination were still reported. At the same time, membership in Roma student organizations and support from peers facilitated both academic and social integration. Higher education was perceived as an important driver of social and professional mobility. Twelve of the sixteen graduates considered that their university studies had significantly improved their life opportunities, and the majority are employed in the public sector or in non-governmental organizations, contributing directly to the promotion of social inclusion and the support of Roma communities. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that obtaining a university degree does not completely eliminate experiences of discrimination, as such experiences may persist in the professional environment as well.

Study 5 examines the perspectives of 10 experts in the fields of education and public policy (5 Roma and 5 non-Roma) regarding the factors influencing Roma access to education. Thematic

analysis identified five major dimensions: educational barriers, inclusion strategies, the lack of statistical data, cultural aspects, and the role of the family. The findings indicate that poverty constitutes the main barrier to Roma educational participation, affecting both school dropout rates and access to higher education. Experts identified two critical points in the educational trajectory: the transition from primary to lower secondary education and the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary education, stages at which the highest educational losses occur. Furthermore, limited family cultural capital, the absence of educational role models, and children's involvement in economic activities contribute to reduced educational and professional aspirations. The findings also highlight the need for integrated interventions that combine financial support, educational counseling, and community-based measures in order to improve educational attainment among Roma students.

Racism and school segregation are regarded as central mechanisms in the reproduction of educational inequalities. Experts report the persistence of discrimination by both peers and teachers, the continued existence of segregated schools, and the disproportionate placement of Roma children in special schools for students with special educational needs (SEN), a phenomenon interpreted as a form of institutional exclusion. Another major issue identified is the lack of statistical data on the Roma population and its participation in education. Experts argue that this “statistical invisibility” limits the evaluation of public policies and hinders the development of effective interventions.

Regarding proposed solutions, respondents emphasized the need to combat school segregation, provide teacher training in intercultural education, expand mentoring and school mediation programs, integrate Roma history and culture into the curriculum, and strengthen Roma student organizations. Most experts acknowledged the usefulness of affirmative action measures but stressed the need to complement them with additional economic and institutional support. Furthermore, the self-organization of Roma communities and the development of support and mentoring networks were identified as important mechanisms for increasing both access to and success in higher education.

The final chapter synthesizes the main conclusions of the dissertation, addresses the research questions, and highlights future directions for research on Roma education and the development of educational policies targeting this community. The findings confirm that the educational inequality experienced by Roma in Romania is a structural and persistent phenomenon, resulting from the interaction of poverty, limited family cultural capital, discrimination, and institutional barriers. The integrated analysis of the five studies demonstrates that educational

disadvantages accumulate throughout the educational trajectory, with the most vulnerable stages being the transitions from primary to lower secondary education and from lower secondary to upper secondary education, where the greatest educational losses occur.

Although Roma participation in higher education has increased slightly in recent years, it remains substantially below that of the general population, reflecting the persistence of inequalities in educational opportunities. At the same time, the study highlights the essential role of teacher support, positive relationships within the school environment, and educational support measures in strengthening motivation and reducing the risk of school dropout. However, the impact of these interventions remains limited in the absence of public policies capable of addressing the effects of poverty, discrimination, and social exclusion. Overall, the conclusions of the dissertation support the need for integrated educational policies focused on early intervention, the prevention of school segregation, support for educational transitions, the strengthening of families' cultural capital, and the development of systematic mechanisms for monitoring educational participation, with the aim of improving Roma students' access to and success in higher education.

KEYWORDS

Educational inequality; Roma community; higher education; school segregation; discrimination; anti-Roma racism; cultural capital; habitus; intersectionality; educational transitions; school dropout; first-generation students; poverty; affirmative action policies; designated places for Roma students; social mobility

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