

The Roma in Serbian Higher Education: Enablers and Barriers (0101)

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Roma education in Serbia faces many challenges despite the international attempts to improve it. The biggest challenge that Roma children face is the persistent structural marginalisation and poverty which has resulted in deteriorating the experiences and achievements of Roma children (Ringold, 2000). Thus, research about improving the education of Roma have started to gaining momentum and the discussion started to include topics such as access and provision of education (Milivojevic, 2008; EQUI-ED, 2012).

Utilizing findings from life history interviews with Roma students in Serbia, this presentation explores on how the socio-cultural practices of these students influence their access to higher education. It highlights the importance of widening participation of Roma in higher education as an integral element in improving Roma people's welfare and enables social mobility (Morley et al, 2010).

Paper

The Roma constitute the largest ethnic minority in Europe and have a long history of social immobility, marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination (Mirga and Gheorghe, 1997).

Despite the many political attempts to address these issues, the Roma people in Serbia still remain disadvantaged in key areas such as health, housing, employment and education. In terms of education today, Roma people remain highly under-represented at higher education level throughout Serbia, only 2% from the total number of Roma population. More precisely, the participation of Roma in student population is 16 times smaller than their peers in the total population of Serbia (EQUI-ED, 2012). With regards to research on Serbian Roma

education, there has been a lot of interest among academics in exploring how the Roma communities in Serbia fare in school-level education (e.g. Milivojevic, 2008). However, there has been little focus on Roma people's experiences of access to higher education. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap.

Drawing on data from an on-going qualitative PhD research, this paper presents preliminary findings in response to the question: 'what barriers and enablers Roma students report in their access to higher education in Serbia? The research employs a feminist methodological approach involving 10 life history interviews to explore Roma students' lived experiences. Drawing on Ahmed's (2012) theories of difference, inclusion and institutional racism, the paper seeks to show how conceptions of diversity and inclusion play out in the Serbian context in relation to Roma students' access to higher education. Specifically, the paper will seek to show findings from the research on how the context of poverty (Ringold, 2005), institutional and social experiences of racism, and the gendered nature of marginalization of Roma people all interact to shape Roma students' access to higher education. In addition the paper will show what Roma students have found useful in accessing higher education.

Preliminary Findings

In the analysis of the data so far, the following preliminary themes have emerged. It must be pointed out that these are subject to change as my analysis continues and thus may be different to what might be in the final output of this research. Therefore for purposes of this paper the following themes will be discussed to some detail. Poverty, racial and gender discrimination, and implementation of affirmative action.

A. Poverty- it is agreed among academics (Connell 1994; Biddle 2014) that poverty has an impact on education attainment in all contexts. In this research issues of lack of finance and

other material needs recurred in the student participants' account and experiences of higher education. This can be illustrated in the following quotes:

Dormitories in Serbia don't cost a lot, only 5.000 dinars, but if you don't have that money it's impossible. My future was uncertain while I was in a dormitory. You never know if you'll be able to pay the rent, food in canteen or whatever. Sometimes we used each other's food cards; we did a lot of different things to survive. There were times when we were penniless, but we survived

The above quotes illustrate how financial difficulties play a role in impacting student's access to higher education. However, the issues of financial difficulties do not end here rather even when in higher education students talked about their initiatives to addressing their financial and material challenges. There were accounts of for instance looking for manual work such as building or cleaning. In some cases, this involved juggling three or four jobs in order for them to earn enough to eat and survive daily.

B. Racial Discrimination with regards to racial discrimination, issues of skin colour seemed to significantly contour the participants identify and sense of self. The participants talked about how their skin pigmentation (Lynn, 2008) meant that they were often treated as the other and stereotypically viewed as incapable of understanding material at that level of study.

'I was not accepted by others in class,... in primary education I was beat by other students who called me a gypsie. But even now... [in HE] sometimes you could see teachers [Lecturers] were expecting me not to know anything or something, they never said it but you could see in their attitude like I would never succeed anyway because of my skin colour..'

There were also accounts of students talking of how they were not expected to achieve or even succeed at higher education level. All this was indicative of how widespread racial stereotyping in the education system in Serbia could be.

C. Gender discrimination: another theme that is of interest is student experiences of education based on gender. For females students in their access to higher education was coloured by the

view that they would not succeed in education as they would be married off quite early, hence were not worth the attention or investment. See quote below

' there is always an expectation that I will be married so no one talked of me studying anything, even applying for places to study you see people look at you like you are wasting time cause you wont succeed..'

For female student in this study therefore they had to manage multiple discriminating one based on their gender and the other based on the skin colour.

D. Implementation of Affirmative Action (AA): on the policy front, though most students thought the AA policy was useful and played a role in helping them gain access to high education. There was a general feeling that in practice AA has challenges such as dealing with issues of disadvantage among Serbs non Roma communities as well as Roma students. In doing there seems to be a conflation of disadvantages groups into one category and hence negates the complex needs of the different groups.

Conclusion:

It is clear from the above points that Roma students experience a lot of challenges in accessing higher education ranging from wider social economic and political issues to personal circumstances that influences their education journeys. So far I have just briefly outlined key points from my research findings.

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