

Teaching with resilient lives – Roma teachers' resilient pedagogy

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Abstract

Being successful at school as a Roma student is a crucial sociological question in many European countries (FRA, 2014; Eurofound, 2017; Ćurčić et al., 2013; Brüggemann & Friedman, 2017). The role of teachers is unquestionable in this. Roma teachers' experience is invaluable when seeking to understand and solve problems that students with similar backgrounds have.

Resilience is our academic starting point which could be used as a framework to interpret and better understand educational questions in Europe.

The word “resilience” is Latin in origin. It means to rebound or boost. In academic life, it is interpreted as an extraordinary phenomenon despite any impedimental circumstances (Békés, 2002; Masten, 2019; Grotberg, 1996). Thus, those in PISA who belong to a lower social class but have higher achievements are called resilient students (OECD, 2016; Agasisti et al., 2018). Educational sociologists say that a person's life is resilient when it is successful, notwithstanding the disadvantaged social background (Ceglédi, 2012). Currently, we are analysing Roma teachers with resilient lives.

Our question: What kind of possibilities and dangers of the resilient life might hide in the pedagogical career? In taking a new approach to resilience, we focus on development through trials and on potential hidden in challenges (Masten, 2019; Le Duc, 2015; Ceglédi, 2020; Békés, 2002).

Because of the uniqueness of the target group, we chose snowball sampling. 6 semi-structured interviews were made in the eastern part of Hungary, in autumn of 2019, in which we emphasize both the resilience of the courses of life taken, the pedagogic job, and the connection between them. We did qualitative analysis of the transcripts.

Results: The resilient Roma teachers incorporate their life experience into their pedagogic fields. Their coping serves as a model for their students. Hence, we see the resilient life as an important problem-solving opportunity all throughout Europe.

Keywords: resilience, Roma, educational inequalities, school practice, social mobility

Theoretical Frameworks

The situation of Roma students in Europe and Hungary

Europe's most significant minority group is that of the Roma (FRA, 2017; REWG, 2001; Polónyi, 2016; Ćurčić et al., 2014; Cserti Csapó, 2019). In Hungary Roma make up the largest ethnic group. The latest external classification survey puts their numbers at 876,000 (Pénzes et al., 2018; Pásztor et al., 2016). Those who suffered the greatest loss during the economic decline following the change of regime in 1989-1990 were the undereducated, which affected the Roma employee more heavily. The Roma population is over-represented in the northern

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and eastern areas of the country, the regions of which are still economically lagging behind today (Bocsi & Ceglédi, 2021).

European researches at the turn of the century clearly showed that big differences existed on every level of education between Roma and non-Roma students (FRA, 2017; REWG, 2001; Polónyi, 2016; Ćurčić et al., 2014; Brüggemann & Friedman, 2017). The Decade of Roma Inclusion Program (Decade of Roma Inclusion, 2005-2015 – in short: the Decade) attempted to help the Roma populations of (in a majority) Eastern-Central European countries to catch up, putting the greatest emphasis on education. During the evaluation of the program, we came across views that clearly considered the program as failed (Ćurčić et al., 2014), but the more optimistic critiques also only testify of sporadic steps forward (Brüggemann & Friedman, 2017). We also find the Hungarian analyses place emphasis on the failure to close the gap between Roma and non-Roma students (Cserti Csapó, 2019; Polónyi, 2016).

In the country ranking based on one of the metrics of the program, the Roma Inclusion Index calculated from the data on the difference between the Roma and non-Roma population, Hungary was 4th among the participating countries in 2005 and 3rd in 2014 (Cserti Csapó, 2019). In the Eastern-Central European context, based on the Glass Ceiling Index (in short: GCI) reflecting schooling chances compared to the whole of society, Hungary is at the back of the pack when it comes to Roma inhabitants 15-years old or older, and based on secondary degree data in second place regarding Roma youth (20-26 years of age) (Polónyi, 2016).

Thus similar tendencies occurred in Hungary in past decades as occurred in neighboring post-socialist nations. In fact, the distance between Roma and non-Roma students does not lessen at higher levels of education (Szalai, 2011; Széll & Nagy, 2018; Polónyi, 2016; Hajdu et al., 2015; Ćurčić et al., 2014; Cserti Csapó, 2019; Brüggemann & Friedman, 2017).

However, when looking at catching up, the situation is not equally bad in some age groups. When we examine the current European statistics, we find that in Hungary, even prior to the act of 2013 mandating kindergarten attendance from the age of three, the early childhood institutional upbringing of children displayed the highest values in Europe (in the 2010/11 year this value was 83%). We can also talk about catching up in elementary education looking at the attendance numbers (FRA, 2017; Bocsi & Ceglédi 2021). Yet at the same time, participation does not mean the same chance for every student. The amount of segregation in European comparison is truly high (Kertesi & Kézdi, 2013; FRA, 2017; Hajdu et al., 2015; Polónyi, 2016; Cserti Csapó, 2019; Fejes & Józsa, 2018).

Following elementary, entrance into secondary school level also displays catching up, but again, only when looking at the participation numbers. For instance, a comparative study of the educational track of a Roma cohort born in 1971 and of one born in 1991 at the ages of 20 and 21, showed that the ratio of those signed up for the secondary level rose from 23% to 89% (Hajdu et al., 2015). Meanwhile from the standpoint of further learning, the Roma students attend the deadend, lower quality schools that do not give diplomas. Furthermore, they are more strongly impacted by dropout during the course of their secondary education (which is not favored by the fact that the compulsory school age limit, of 16 years, is reached prior to reaching the end of their training). Thus, in total, the chances of getting a secondary school degree (be it diploma or trade) in their circles are lower (Hajdu et al., 2015).

At the start of higher education, however, we can already talk about incredible detachment (Hajdu et al., 2015; Polónyi, 2016; Cserti Csapó, 2019). Their odds of getting a higher education degree is but a fraction of what the majority society's would be (Table 1). All in all, we can say that it is true that catching up has begun, but the inequalities have crept upwards (Róbert, 2000; Boudon, 1974).

Table 1. *The highest educational level of the population aged 15 and above in Hungary, 2016 (self-reporting, %)*

		less than 8 classes	8 classes	secondary vocational education without school- leaving exam	school- leaving exam	college, university, etc. with certificate
2016	<i>Whole population</i> (N=8 381 900)	3.2	23.2	20.9	32.2	20.5
	<i>Gypsy (Roma)</i> (N=212 568)	17.3	60.3	14.2	6.9	1.3
2011	<i>Whole population</i> (N=8 489 969)	4.9	26.8	21.3	30.1	17
	<i>Gypsy (Roma)</i> (N=213 259)	23.1	57.6	13.1	5	1.2

Source: 2016 Microcensus, 2011 Census (Authors' own editing, based on KSH, 2014a; 2014b; 2018) Note: Gypsy (Roma) = "The respondent belonged to the given nationality if he/she indicated the given nationality in at least one of the questions concerning nationality, mother tongue or language used in the family or among friends." (KSH, 2018: 7)

We gave voice to those teachers and educators in our study that chose and could choose the atypical path at important crossroads in their educational careers, and who today are among the few who had success in stepping into the career of an intellectual despite their Roma descent.

In getting to know their life path, our goal was to examine two questions. One of those was: what led them all the way to getting a diploma, despite their social disadvantage, which could be deemed main sources of their resilient life path (Kende, 2005; Pusztai, 2004; Torkos, 2005; Ceglédi, 2012)? Our second question was as follows: in the course of their current educational work, what does resilient life mean, are its experiences implementable, and, if so, how does this appear in everyday school life?

Exceptional life paths – Resilience

The word "resilience" is Latin in origin. It means to rebound or boost. In academic life, it is interpreted as an extraordinary phenomenon despite any impedimental circumstances (Békés, 2002; Masten, 2019; Grotberg, 1996).

Thus, those in PISA who belong to a lower social class but have higher achievements are called resilient students (OECD, 2016; Agasisti et al., 2018). Educational sociologists say that a person's life is resilient when it is successful, notwithstanding the disadvantaged social background (Ceglédi, 2012). Disadvantaged social background may mean an unfavourable place to live, parents' low educational degree, status of employment, low income, family disintegration, or nationality.

We must mention that, a life path can be resilient in psychological terms as well, if someone successfully overcame severe trial and crisis, be it losing a loved one, a sudden change in circumstance, sickness, etc. As a result, also independent of social background, the experiences of a life path can carry in themselves resilient features. Based on all these, it is not only the teacher with a, sociologically speaking, resilient life (meaning earning a diploma despite social disadvantages) who can be resilient in their work. Yet, it would stretch the current study's framework if we would turn aside to this approach.

In our present study, we apply the approach of sociology of education. Currently, we are analysing Roma teachers with resilient lives. Their life paths began with social disadvantages which they successfully overcame, and today they can work as intellectuals with diplomas.

Research Questions

In our study, we analyze the personal and professional life paths of Roma teachers that had a rough start. The definition of resilient teacher can have two meanings: First, a teacher is resilient when, he lived a resilient life and despite his disadvantaged situation gained a teaching degree. Second, a teacher is resilient when, in the course of his career helps disadvantaged students to become successful, that is resilient, through overcoming their disadvantages (Ceglédi, 2020).

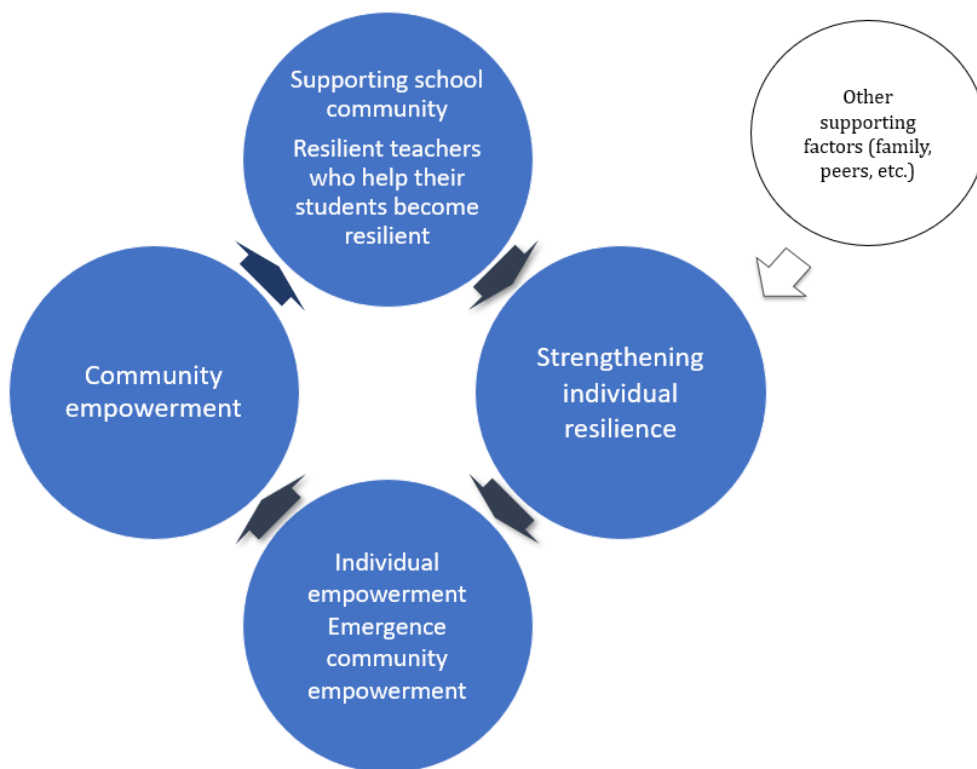
But, what happens between these two seasons of life (the resilient private life path and the resilient teaching career)? Are they connected to one another, and, if they are, then what characterizes this relationship? Does the „knowledge” gained through struggle with hardship on the personal life path appear in the teaching career?

Pedagogy students do not arrive to teacher training with tabula rasa, in fact, all that they learned and experienced in their childhood and in becoming an adult can play a role in their career choice. Also, the skills and attitudes offered during the teacher training course, through a personal filter, are built into the teachers’ cognitive and emotional repertoire. Later, it is not only their university experience and subject knowledge that they carry into their workplace. Their life paths touch all those areas that define their teaching jobs: their commitment to the career, their relationships formed with colleagues, superiors, parents and kids, their well-being, their ability to show empathy etc.

The question of our analysis was: does the resilient life path have an effect on the teaching attitudes with which teachers can help students with similar backgrounds to tackle their own hardships, and, if so, in what way does it have an effect?

Resilient teachers’ development can be envisioned as the cycle shown in the Figure 1.

Figure 1. *A possible life cycle and work of resilient teachers*



Source: Own editing, based on: Varga A., 2019; Ceglédi, 2015; 2020; Ceglédi et al., 2018

An important part of a resilient life is a school where there is a supporting community with teachers who help their students become resilient. This community strengthens individual resilience – as the right side of the figure shows. The culmination (or a mature stage) of this process is individual empowerment. In parallel with this process, community empowerment may appear (Varga A., 2019). This means that teacher candidates have the intention and the ability to help students overcome disadvantages. And further, if a teacher is characterized by community empowerment, he or she can be a resilient teacher who – as a member in a supporting school community – helps their students become resilient. And the cycle again repeats and continues, from generation to generation.

The examination of teachers' family background is typically a neglected area (Bacsikai, 2015). The teacher himself rarely ends up in the focus of this sort of study. We find them rather in the assisting role. In the studies introducing resilient life paths, for instance, it is a returning motif that one or more teachers were decisive in successfully coping with hardship in every part of the resilient life (e. g. Varga A., 2019; Ceglédi, 2012; Hafičová et al., 2020). We have far less information regarding what fuels this type of teacher, what past and motifs are behind this help, and if his own fate's similarity is significant or not in this. With our research, we would like to serve as an additive.

Methods

„The Council of Europe uses ‘Roma’ as an umbrella term. It refers to Roma, Sinti, Kale and related groups in Europe, including Travellers and the Eastern groups (Dom and Lom), and covers the wide diversity of the groups concerned, including persons who identify themselves as Gypsies.” (FRA, 2017: 12). In our research we called those teachers Roma, who referred to themselves as such at previous points of contact.

Our research subjects are such Roma teachers who have resilient life paths, that is who gained a teacher's diploma – in spite of their disadvantageous circumstances. Because of the target group's specialty, we chose the snowball method as the mode of sample gathering (N=6). The study took place the fall of 2019 in Hungary's eastern counties. On average, 50-minute, semi-structured, personal life interviews were recorded, during which the Roma interviewees told of their own life paths, of the social backgrounds of their students and the challenges, teaching methods thereof, as well as of their educational *ars poetica*.

During the analysis, we apply the Grounded Theory's (GT) methods. The work of Glaser and Strauss can be considered one of the approach's foundation stones (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Sallay & Martos, 2018). According to Glaser and Strauss' thought processes, we can conclude a generally relevant theory from the phenomena observed during the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Glaser, a definition and finding is molded from the previously recorded data (Glaser, 2002). In our research, we follow the analysis methods of the direction represented by GT Corbin and Strauss, which allows for use of such categories as well that already exists in special literature (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Sallay & Martos, 2018). Instead of erecting hypotheses we put forth questions. The questions involve overarching themes, but the detailed conclusions we draw from the prepared interviews and from them we formulate findings, and at the same time base our work on previous special literature.

Results

Personal life path

Our interviewees spent their childhoods in characteristically disadvantaged small villages. These settlements lacked appropriate infrastructure and job opportunity, and, with one exception, were inhabited by significant numbers of Roma families. In the beginning, the families lived in segregates within the settlements as well. After, they took a sort of social step forward, either when they moved out of these segregates, or when parents got jobs.

Difficult circumstances are evident, but typically one of the parents worked, which meant a living for them, even if it were scarce. This one income proved enough for these families to represent the lower strata's „middle class” and „elite” in the given micro-social environment. All of this created an important livelihood minimum necessary for our interview subjects to find their place in the education system (Ceglédi, 2012; Kende, 2005).

All of our interview subjects testified that their parents placed great emphasis on study. This is an atypical feature in families of similar backgrounds. Resignation is not their answer to a hard life, but rather the opposite is where they gain strength. As a sort of spring board, the harder it is for them the livelihood, the stronger the desire to break out (Ceglédi et al., 2018). Parents' commitment to study is an extraordinarily powerful factor to make their life paths resilient. Zhou also emphasises that those emigrant Chinese families in the USA where the parents have low educational degree, the children could outstand due to their encouraging ethnic community (Zhou, 2005).

„One thing I know well, that I need to study. They knew that, that they have a clever little girl and she needs to study. They paid much attention to this, lest she too earn her bread and butter in such misery, with work this hard.”

At the same time, parents' commitment to study was limited. Getting a profession was the primary goal rather than getting a diploma. The interview subjects were characteristically encouraged by their teachers to choose the intellectual career path, even when the family had an opposing opinion.

Our interviewees began their elementary school studies at the appropriate time, at the age of six. They spoke about how they loved to attend school. Thus, school for them was a place

of comfort, which is a critical reoccurring motif in resilient life paths (e. g. Ceglédi, 2012; Hafičová et al., 2020). At the same time, as in previous studies (e. g. Kende, 2005; Hafičová et al., 2020), here too subjects reported that they had to face prejudice and discrimination based upon their origin. Our subjects came up with multiple strategies to cope with discrimination, among which the most typical was that by proving their performance, they achieved the acceptance of others. Therefore, once again, a negative factor serves as a source of the resilient life path.

„As a Gypsy, I was only able to survive in every class community, if I proved myself. So, I was not allowed to study on an intermediate level or to be a student that just gets by with only a pass. Otherwise the others would have picked on me, they would have walked all over me, and would have driven me out of that class. This way, that they that I am a good student, I am clever, they did not know what to do with me. They accepted me.”

Among African Americans a similar phenomenon can be observed (Cose, 1993).

Without exception, the resilience subjects always tried to make their own way, to improve it. They faced many difficulties throughout their lives, but still they did not give up. Many times trials and failures only made them stronger in striving to reach their goals. On their life paths resilient features like „disadvantages turned into advantages”, or the „bounce back effect” could be seen.

„I took emotional punches there, but I knew one thing for certain that I have a goal. I would like to get a kindergarden teacher degree, and then to teach Roma kids. To get there, I need to endure everything. These college years were one great bootcamp.”

„The disadvantages were what today became advantages. This is a snowball and that snowball has to be melted, stopped, or diverted. So, a person's life is a trial and the problems are challenges that drive that person to solve them, to be creative, to find his own solutions.”

Professional life path

Among our study's subjects five spoke of how they always wanted to teach. They possess powerful internal motivation. They believe that they can help Roma kids who have similar lives and come from disadvantageous circumstances. The classes and groups that these teachers instruct and nurture consist of disadvantaged or Roma children. The subjects expressed in the interviews that they attempt to support them in studying and in never giving up. They believe in the fact that it is possible to overcome disadvantages.

„The chestnut too is only prickly from the outside, while on the inside it is the shiniest and smoothest. And, a true teacher is the one who is brave enough to break open the chestnut. I do not consider him a teacher who only touches the chestnut from the outside and squinting criticizes the child and the family. One can only understand that child if he goes down into the child's family and devotes time to searching out the causes. He will discover how much harder the situation is for the child than for his other classmates, that it would not even be possible to measure with a ruler.”

During the interviews the phenomenon of community empowerment was also observable in the subjects (Varga A., 2019). They already understand what it means to be at a disadvantage, to live among poor circumstances, and how to, despite these hindering factors, get a degree and to have a successful life path. It is for this reason that they help their students and continuously encourage them and give them council. They utilize their prior experiences in their present work, conveying to the students the situations they themselves have been through, preparing them, showing them how to successfully participate in the majority society's everyday life.

„I started to teach them everything, but mostly about what awaits them in the world out there, because I knew very well how hard it is, as a Gypsy and a dependent of the state, to stand one's ground outside the protection of the foster home. I tried to teach them many

things that they could use. And what was very important, that I strengthen their confidence, their self-esteem and that I develop in them such skills that are critical in order for them to make their way in the real world.”

Based on their testimonies, every child needs to have equal part in the education opportunities offered, regardless of how talented and successful they are in their studies. The resilient teachers strive to nurture close relationships with the parents as well. They know what their students go through, thus they encourage them to study. They are able to understand their students because, they too grew up in similar circumstances. Their own life path experiences, without exception, help them in their work.

„The teacher makes his judgments based on what he sees on the outside. To reach him who is lower than us, we must bend down. If someone is under the table, we bend over, or we even do it to feed the dog. Therefore, we must also lower ourselves to support, to help them. However, for most teachers who are not from disadvantaged circumstances this is hard.”

They use their experiences instinctively rather than knowingly. They always know what they ought to do. They are excited about their work, about teaching and instructing. They believe that the concept in special literature, that obstacles simply roll on through life like snowballs (Masten et al., 2008) is not true. After all, they too were able to overcome these obstacles, and were able to rise out of the disadvantageous situation.

„The disadvantages were what today became advantages. This is a snowball and that snowball has to be melted, stopped, or diverted. So, a person’s life is a trial and the problems are challenges that drive that person to solve them, to be creative, to find his own solutions.”

These teachers are sensitive to the problems of those students similar to them. According to Ceglédi, using their own life path experiences, they can become active players in decreasing social inequalities (Ceglédi, 2015). They fill the translator role, that is, they can authentically convey the majority’s culture toward their original community (Varga A., 2019).

„I would usually take them to the library to show them what joys they can find there, that they can look for a book in the catalog, that they might see life from a different perspective, see something positive.”

Resilient teachers are motivated during their work. The teaching career, teaching for them is a volunteer activity. Through teaching, their lives become more full as well, filled with meaning. In their opinion, in teaching one must be able to value even the smallest successes. This carries them forward on this road, and it also strengthens their personal empowerment. In this way, community empowerment will be the source of personal empowerment (Varga A., 2019).

Summary

During our research we explored those factors which played a prominent role in how our subjects could have resilient lives. Help from the family or even school intervention are important in this. Teachers were the ones who encouraged our subjects to first high school diplomas, then to attend higher education. They played a defining role in helping the students find their callings too. In most resilient teachers’ lives, from elementary school on, there was already present one or more teachers who supported and encouraged them in the forward progress of their studies.

We examined what sort of relationship exists between a personal life path and the work of a teacher. In the interviews this relationship between the resilient life path and the resilient teaching career clearly stood out. The Roma resilient teachers are empathetic, accepting, and ready to help disadvantaged children. They know their family background, thus they are able to understand them. They believe that in every child there hides talent that only the correct environment can help unearth. As kids, the teachers too had similar

situations, but they walked the road to the teacher's degree all the way to the end. Now they give their students their experience, helping them to overcome their disadvantages. These teachers also appear in the translator role, and the values they mastered they convey to their pupils (Varga A., 2019).

The fact that in our interviews a congruent relationship is shown between the resilient life path and the resilient teaching career, makes meaningful, authentic teaching possible, which is good for both students and teachers. The sense of mission possessed by the teachers who have walked resilient life paths appears as a strong factor that will keep them on course (Ceglédi, 2012; 2020). In getting answers to our questions about motivation, we found out that they have never thought of leaving their careers – which is again an extraordinary result among Hungary's teachers (e. g. Horváth, 2020; Varga J., 2004).

What practical advices can we come up with based on what was learned from the interviews?

First, the valuable knowledge students can draw out from their own lives can send an important message to the teacher training program. During the course it is worth building upon this, and it is paramount to help the students in authentically embedding this knowledge into their educational selves.

School actors on the other hand can play an important role in ensuring such an atmosphere be present in school faculties that those arriving starter teachers with resilient life paths might recognize and, during the course of their life path, take advantage of matured values, as well as being able to apply those in teaching.

Acknowledgments

Supported by the ÚNKP-20-4-II New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Innovation and Technology from the source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund.

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