BOOK REVIEW


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Studies and analyses of various educational and pedagogical issues in Hungary and Germany, which are an integral part of Andrea Óhidy’s research interest. Her latest book Bildungsbenechteiligung und Bildungserfolg: Roma im ungarischen Bildungssystem, published in German, which describes the situation of the Roma minority in the Hungarian educational system, is part of this context. It is the latest in a series of three books—in the series Roma Studies—Cigány Tanulmányok—Roma Studien, published jointly by the Pécsi Tudományegyetem BTK NTI Romológia és Nevelésszociológia Tanszék, and the Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg Institut für Erziehungswissenschaft in Hungarian, English and German.

The study of the educational situation of Roma people is not a new field of research for the author, as she has already published several papers on this topic: she has examined, inter alia, the participation of Roma people in lifelong learning, the effects of teaching on the learning paths of Roma and Gypsy women in Hungary, and the role of counselling, mentoring and mediation in improving the educational situation of Roma and Sinti in Germany. The book on the educational disadvantages and successes of the Roma in Hungary is a continuation of this research direction, and is divided into three main chapters.

In the first chapter of the book, the author has attempted to clarify the semantic domain of Roma minority as a definition, which is essential for the discussion of the topic due to the uncertainty that often surrounds the use and interpretation of terms “Roma”, and “Gypsy”. The author refers to the problem of the definition as well, which is also discussed in the literature, noting that “there is no scientific answer to the question of who can be called Roma, as the definition depends on the current political and socio-economic situation, cultural context, subjective feelings, and (pre-)judgements of the people who create it” (p. 12), and although for the reasons outlined above we do not get a generally valid definition here either, we can learn about the approaches and classifications used in Hungarian statistics and research that attempt to identify Roma people. In the following parts of the chapter, on the one hand, we get an idea of

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the development of the social situation of the Roma minority after the regime change in 1989
and its current situation: the small number of Roma who are assimilating into the middle class
and the majority living in deep poverty, socially and regionally marginalized; on the other hand,
we can learn about the majority Hungarian society’s image of Roma people which is fraught
with prejudices and the image of Hungarians which indicates the separation of Roma from non-
Roma, and the conflict-ridden coexistence of the majority Hungarian society and the Roma
minority, including the anti-Gypsyism in society and the few successful attempts to integrate the
Roma minority.

The second chapter discusses the legal environment that determines the situation of ethnic
minorities in general and the specific legal environment affecting education in particular, in
the context of the Hungarian education system. In addition, we get an idea of the educational
situation of the largest minority in Hungary, the Roma, and Óhidy also refers to the problems
of discussing the latter: the difficulty of identifying the “Roma” as a category, the failure to take
into account the internal division of the Roma ethnic group in analyses and research, and the
lack of statistical data collection on the Roma. These difficulties, as the author points out, do
indeed allow only limited conclusions, but she nevertheless attempts to provide a compre-
hensive account of the difficulties and disadvantages—such as late kindergarten, segregation of
Roma children, the disadvantages caused by the selective Hungarian school system, or
“ghettoisation”—that Roma minority members may encounter during their school careers and
that hinder them from pursuing a successful educational career path leading to a higher ed-
ucation degree, at all levels of the Hungarian educational system, from kindergarten to higher
education.

The third and most exciting chapter of the book presents the results of narrative interviews
with women, who were viewed as and self-identified as Roma, and expert interviews. We also
learn about the educational biographies of ten Roma women who have successfully completed
the school levels of the Hungarian education system, and as a result their social status has
improved significantly and they have reached the middle class level. In the introduction to the
chapter, we learn that the reason for including women as interviewees in the research was that,
in addition to the disadvantages that the Roma minority in general faces due to their ethnic,
cultural diversity, and social situation, “their gender also hinders them from succeeding in
their school careers, as the traditional female role concept, limited to the “child-kitchen-
church” triangle, still often dominates in Roma families and does not support (further) ed-
ucation” (p. 73). The narrative interview method also provides insights into subjective theories
and the interviewees’ perspectives on the factors that hindered or helped Roma women to
successfully finish their different schools and on how they managed to start from a cumula-
tively disadvantaged situation and become people with higher education degrees. The personal
experiences gained during the narrative interviews were complemented by statistical data and
analyses of the relevant literature on the topic, as well as expert interviews aimed at exploring
the situation of Roma in Hungary, their educational disadvantages, and the various support
programmes.

The Roma are one of the most populous and disadvantaged minorities in Hungary, and
although from the book we can learn about the difficulties, pitfalls, and successes of Roma
women based on personal life stories, and subjective experiences, they also provide the list of
the tasks and duties of the actors of the school system in order to open up the possibility
of upward social mobility for as many disadvantaged Roma as possible through successful schooling. Therefore, Andrea Óhidy’s book “Bildungsbeneheiligung und Bildungserfolg: Roma im ungarischen Bildungssystem” (Educational disadvantage and educational success: Roma in the Hungarian education system) will be of interest to both professionals, and non-professionals.