Searching for the Right Path: Segregation, Integration, and Inclusion

Csilla ANTAL[•]

Abstract

The research examines the three most well-known educational strategies concerning Roma children from theoretical and practical perspectives. Numerous studies and articles widely discuss segregation, integration, and inclusion; however, their practical implementation in everyday life often goes beyond the frameworks presented in academic literature. Between 2020 and 2024, a research project investigated these three educational strategies with a strong emphasis on practical considerations. The primary focus of the academic work was on the factors influencing the institutional attendance of preschool-aged Roma children in Harghita County. Data was collected from four major zones of Harghita County: Odorheiu - Secuiesc, Miercurea Ciuc, Gheorgheni, and Cristuru Secuiesc, where various kindergartens were visited. Segregated and integrated groups were observed, and interviews were conducted with kindergarten teachers and the parents of attending children. The findings revealed that most preschool-aged Roma children in Harghita County are enrolled in segregated educational settings. Integrated education was observed at only two sites: the Ficánka Kindergarten in Odorheiu-Secuiesc and another anonymous kindergarten in the rural region of Odorheiu-Secuiesc. The results highlighted unique perspectives: we learned about the challenges faced by rural kindergartens operating in segregated and integrated groups and gained first-hand insights into the difficulties outlined by the educators themselves. At the Ficánka Kindergarten Center in Odorheiu-Secuiesc, segregated and integrated groups are present; however, inclusion efforts are still in their early stages. The long-term goals of the Ficánka Kindergarten include implementing a fully inclusive strategy, although such a goal requires complex infrastructural development. We did not find any kindergarten within Harghita County that currently embodies a fully inclusive educational approach. From a practical perspective, inclusion remains uncharted, yet pursuing long-term inclusive goals is unquestionably worthwhile.

Keywords: segregation, integration, inclusion, romology, institutional attendance

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[•] Ph.D. student, Ficánka Kindergarten, Odorheiu – Secuiesc, 40 Rákóczi Street, 535600, phone number: +40 755153 307, email: csillaantal81@gmail.com

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Introduction

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, published in 2000, prohibits discrimination, including that based on racial and gender identity. Furthermore, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union empowers legislators to adopt legal measures to eliminate such forms of discrimination.

Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union clearly states the prohibition of discrimination:

> "(1) Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, color, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age, or sexual orientation shall be prohibited.
> (2) Within the scope of application of the Treaties and without prejudice to any of their specific provisions, discrimination on grounds of nationality shall be prohibited." (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2000, p. C 364/12´).

Nevertheless, reality paints a different picture. Across Europe, Roma children living in deep poverty must struggle significantly to find their place in everyday society. No matter the life situation, a Roma child is still, unfortunately, at a disadvantage compared to children belonging to the majority population.

Discrimination is not always easily identifiable, yet children from minority backgrounds often bear the "mark of difference." Their chances of entering the education system, achieving strong academic results, continuing their studies, and eventually building a prosperous professional career are substantially lower than those of their majority peers.

Defining the Concepts of Segregation, Integration, and Inclusion

According to current sociological perspectives, most society approaches Roma communities through three key concepts for promoting equal opportunities: segregation, integration, and inclusion. But what exactly do these terms mean? It is important to clearly and precisely define each of these concepts to gain a deeper understanding of this complex issue.

Let us begin with segregation. There are various schools of thought and theoretical approaches to the concept of segregation. Hungarian sociologist Ildikó Bihari, paraphrasing the work of several academic authors, defines segregation as follows:

Academic literature distinguishes between two types of segregation: exclusion (external separation) and self-separation. Exclusion refers to a deliberate, external intervention that creates separation. One form of this is intra-school segregation, such as separation between school tracks or classes, within-class divisions, extracurricular grouping, or assigning Roma students as private learners. Another form is inter-school segregation within the school system, including separation between schools in different

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localities, institutional-level segregation, or the unjustified categorization of Roma children as disabled or students with special educational needs (SEN)(Bihari, 2021, p. 70).

This approach distinguishes between two types of segregation: external segregation and voluntary segregation. External segregation occurs as a result of external intervention: for example, Roma children are taught in separate classes from their majority peers.

Moreover, in Harghita County, it is even more common that most schools and kindergartens do not admit Roma students at all. Therefore, Roma children are segregated at the institutional level of education. There are schools and kindergartens established only for Roma children, where every single child is of Roma ethnicity, and we can not find a single class, group, or even a single child who would belong to the national majority in that particular school or kindergarten.

Even today, the children of Roma neighborhoods and settlements are mostly concentrated in a single school in the cities, and even if they are enrolled in a mixed class from the fifth grade onwards, they often study there with non-Roma pupils who are also disadvantaged (Jakab, 2019, p. 122).

Simina Dragos, a Romanian-born researcher with a PhD in educational sciences, has also introduced a new term linked to the concept of segregation: antigypsyism.

Antigypsyism is expressed through the prominence of narratives based on the 'deficits' of Romani students... and through school segregation (Dragos, 2022, p.77). Antigypsyism is a kind of prejudiced attitude of the majority of society towards the Roma. This approach classifies segregation as a prejudice-based educational strategy.

Jack Greenberg, an American civil rights lawyer and legal scholar, links another concept to segregation: the so-called "White Flite" phenomenon. School segregation can be further exacerbated by the behaviours of non-Roma families who move out once their children's schools begin admitting Roma children (Greenberg, 2010, p.53). Greenberg's concept defines segregation as separation based on skin color. As the term "White Flite" suggests, non-Roma families feel superior to Roma families because of their skin color. In Greenberg's approach, segregation is thus a 'legal' form of racism.

Now let us move on to integration and inclusion. Gabriella Papp, a special education teacher and educational specialist, considers integration and inclusion to be broad concepts. The concepts of integration and inclusion are both constantly evolving and changing in meaning. Both are based on value assumptions that seek to enhance the cohesiveness of societies (Papp, 2012, p.13). The words „integration" and „inclusion" share similar meanings but differ in several key aspects. This study (a collaboration of international authors) interprets inclusion and integration from a sociological perspective along the lines of the relationship between the Roma and the non-Roma.

Social integration can be understood as the proactive effort of majority society to create conditions that allow Roma communities to access and participate in societal life. This includes formal actions, such as schools increasing the number of Roma children in

their student body, implementing desegregation programs at the local level, and offering various training initiatives to boost Roma employment. While integration is a prerequisite for inclusion, achieving true inclusion requires the fulfillment of further conditions.

Social inclusion means that members of minority communities feel at home within the majority society. They are not hindered in maintaining their minority identity, and the majority sees them as equal members. With this dual belonging, they experience no barriers in daily life—they have the same chances to obtain employment and the same opportunities in all areas as members of the majority community (Papp, 2012, p.14).

A study published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2020 interprets inclusion as the opposite of segregation and antigypsyism. This work then identifies initiatives aimed at improving Roma students' inclusion and recurrent challenges, such as segregation in education and anti-gypsyism (OECD, 2020, p.110).

The Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences categorizes integration and inclusion as concepts that originate from each other and can only be interpreted in relation to one another. Social inclusion is replacing social integration: programs and processes designed to prevent exclusion and encourage inclusion are developed at the community level (The Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences).

Segregation, Integration, and Inclusion in the Field of Education

Education is a field in which all three approaches—segregation, integration, and inclusion—are simultaneously present. However, there is still no clear, evidence-based consensus on which educational model—segregated, integrated, or inclusive—is most effective in the development process of the Roma children.

What distinguishes exclusion, segregation, integration, and inclusion from each other? – Exclusion occurs when students with disability are denied access to education… Segregation is when students with disability are educated separate education settings… Integration occurs when students with disability are placed in mainstream classrooms, but no adjustments take place… Inclusion involves systemic reform and is when students with disability are educated in regular classrooms, alongside their same-age peers (UNCRPD, 2016, p.11).

The long-term goal is to establish a healthy, cooperative, and respectful relationship between the majority society and the Roma community, and the first step toward this is educational integration. However, due to their unique cultural background and specific situation, the Roma require a special approach in several areas of life. To include them without forcing assimilation—and to ensure that the Roma community retains its distinctive values—we must examine the available set of tools, which includes segregation, integration, and inclusion. The three concepts mentioned above are approaches that extend beyond the everyday framework of educational institutions; however, their primary area of application is education.

In 2004, the Romanian Ministry of Education announced its commitment to an educational policy prioritizing equal opportunities. The main objective is to ensure everyone has access to educational institutions and quality education, regardless of ethnic background or mother tongue (Notificare – Nr. 29323/20.04.2004). The document also addresses issues related to improving the education of Roma children and highlights the situation at that time when segregationist strategies were still the most widespread.

In 2007, an official order (Ordinul 1540/19.07.2007) was issued, which stipulated that starting with the 2007–2008 school year, it would be prohibited to establish segregated first and fifth-grade classes consisting exclusively or predominantly of Roma children. The issue's significance is underscored by a follow-up notification in 2010 (Notificare nr. 28463 / 3 March 2010), which outlined further measures and recommendations to eliminate segregation in kindergartens and schools.

Law 198/2023 is the most recent piece of legislation that explicitly prohibits segregation in education and emphasizes the right to access quality education, a right that belongs to every student. On December 6, 2024, a new methodology was introduced, providing a detailed framework for the prevention, monitoring, and implementation of desegregation in schools. It imposes obligations on schools, requiring them to collect data and report annually on segregation-related situations. Educational institutions must also establish a desegregation committee, intervene in cases of segregation, and report on the progress of desegregation efforts at both local and national levels.

Nevertheless, these regulations have yet to be fully implemented, as most schools and kindergartens do not comply with the directives. Segregation remains a factor—whether due to residential patterns or other influences—and unfortunately, it has not entirely disappeared from the educational system.

In 2023, the Social Inclusion Strategy for the Roma Population of Harghita County was published, written by sociologists Tamás Kiss and Andrea Sólyom.

The Strategy was developed with the involvement of other professionals and county-level experts as well, and it maps out the social situation of the Roma population living in Harghita County. It includes real surveys, development plans, and proposed solutions designed to improve the living standards of Roma communities. I contributed to the development of the aspects related to educational strategies. As the data outlined below (based on an accurate survey) clearly shows, segregation remains the most widespread practice in Harghita County.

Table 1

Distribution of Roma Students by Type of Educational Setting

	Harghita County	Cristuru Secuiesc	Odorheiu Secuiesc	Ciuc	Gheorgheni	Toplița
Number of Roma Students	3443	1064	1210	928	217	24
Segregated/Roma Educational Setting (%)	42	78	25	25	44	0
Strong Roma Presence	20	14	8	22	47	0
Integrated Educational Setting	38	8	53	48	9	100
Number of Roma Students (Urban)	922	231	338	145	139	19
Segregated/Roma Educational Setting	58	33	45	3	69	0
Strong Roma Presence	15	57	7	0	11	0
Integrated Educational Setting	27	10	48	97	20	100
Number of Roma Students (Rural)	2521	833	872	733	78	5
Segregated/Roma Educational Setting	40	90	20	32	15	0
Strong Roma Presence	21	4	9	30	58	0
Integrated Educational Setting	41	7	71	38	27	100

Roma Children in Segregated Education

"Education and upbringing provided separately—in a different institution, group, or classroom—for children or students with individual differences determined by social, cultural, or biological factors, apart from most children or students." (Bakos, 1977, p. 729) The study published by authors L. Costache, E. Crai, and Claudiu Ivan introduces two additional subtypes of educational segregation: inter-school segregation and intra-school segregation. While previous studies on school segregation have focused on inter-school segregation (the distribution of students from various categories among different schools), we argue that it is equally important to consider the intra-school segregation side (i.e. segregation within the same school learning spaces)(Costache, Crai, & Ivan, 2024, p. 51).

In Harghita County, inter-school segregation is more common. Intra-school segregation is not an issue, as usually only one school or kindergarten in a given locality is willing to admit Roma students. Over time, due to the so-called "White Flight" phenomenon described above, the institution gradually becomes a school or a kindergarten where only Roma children are present, as the Hungarian and Romanian parents instantly take their children from the given institution.

School segregation of Roma has become one of the most studied disciplines in the field of education in the last 20 years (Varga, 2022, p. 14). Fernando Varga's 2022 study also emphasizes the complexity of the problem; however, the abundance of theoretical approaches has still not resolved the issue in practice.

The segregation of Roma children continues to be a significant issue in education, even though the 2004 notification (Notificare - Nr. 29323/20.04.2004) highlights the harmful consequences of segregation and offers guidance to educational institutions on how it can be eliminated. However, since this document does not carry legal force, segregation remains widespread in the Romanian education system.

According to Eurochild's 2025 report, the level of school segregation affecting Roma children increased in Romania between 2016 and 2021. This further demonstrates that the legal measures taken to reduce segregated education are not being effectively implemented in practice.

There are significant gaps in health, education and welfare outcomes between Roma and non-Roma children in all Council of Europe member States and in every sector, including access to preschool and primary education in Romania. In Romania, the segregation of Roma children in schools has worsened over time, with rates increasing from 28 % in 2016 to 51 % in 2021 (Eurochild, 2025, p. 12).One of the main reasons for this is that many Roma families live in larger, concentrated communities, meaning that children are primarily directed to schools and kindergartens closest to their homes. Additionally, transporting Roma children to institutions in other areas poses logistical challenges, and their limited knowledge of the Romanian language further complicates their integration into the educational system.

Between 2005 and 2015, Romania participated in the Decade of Roma Inclusion, a program aimed at promoting the social integration of the Roma population. This initiative identified four key areas for implementing integration measures, one of which was education. The compared assessment shows that obtaining successes in the Decade implementation depends both on the existence of a proper institutional framework and on the prepared and implemented policies in the four priority areas (Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, 2010, p. 5).

The National Roma Integration Strategy (2022–2027) also highlights the need for institutions with high percentages of Roma students to implement inclusive education practices. This involves schools and kindergartens becoming open and accessible to all children, regardless of nationality, and adopting curricula that promote cultural

diversity. The explicit goal is to eliminate segregation. If not to eliminate, then at least to actively promote the practical implementation of integration and inclusion.

Measures aimed at accelerating the integration of Roma, preventing and eliminating segregation, taking into account the gender dimension and the situation of young Roma, and establishing core values, as well as intermediate objectives and measurable targets (The National Roma Integration Strategy (2022–2027) , 2021, p. 1) Nevertheless, in many places, these measures are not implemented in practice, and segregation in Roma children's education persists. As a result, educational institutions often fail to provide quality education to Roma students. Among the harmful effects of segregation are the perpetuation and strengthening of social prejudices, which further hinders the integration of Roma communities. For the children, this only intensifies feelings of marginalization. Moreover, a shortage of qualified teachers is frequently an issue in these segregated schools. Segregated education reinforces the sense of social exclusion and contributes to the development of various forms of voluntary segregation among Roma adults. Consequently, Roma children find it more challenging to succeed in communities where the majority is not Roma. Living in isolated communities often makes it hard for them to build trusting, tension-free relationships with members of the non-Roma society.

At the same time, more and more Roma parents are beginning to recognize the disadvantages of segregation. They do not want their children to grow up exclusively among peers with whom they already share the same residential environment. These parents increasingly understand that it is not beneficial for children to face the same social challenges at school or kindergarten that they encounter in their neighborhoods. They often express their desire not to have their children educated in environments where they might be exposed to foul language or harmful behavioral patterns. There are many differences in lifestyle and worldview, even among families living within Roma communities. Often, within the same residential area, families who are willing to take steps toward integration with the majority of society live side by side with families who follow antisocial social patterns in their everyday lives. Families who want to make progress usually have jobs and regularly send their children to kindergarten and school. In contrast, their neighbors may only occasionally send their children to school or kindergarten—not for the sake of the children's development but to receive social benefits. Members of families striving to break out of poverty are often deeply frustrated by having to live in a discouraging environment, and this kind of involuntary mixing continues within the school system in the case of segregated education.Among families living according to antisocial patterns, aggressive behaviors are more common, both within the family and outside of it. One Roma mother I interviewed, who lives her life following conscious steps toward integration, also mentioned that she does not understand how the teachers working at the school in the Roma settlement can tolerate the kind of behavior they experience from some Roma parents. It is common for parents to speak to teachers disrespectfully and aggressively, failing to show them the respect

they deserve. It is commendable that parents striving to break out recognize the harmful effects of group dynamics and wish to prevent their children from being exposed to aggressive behavior patterns exhibited by other Roma children and parents.

Still, the majority of communities often remain unwilling to accept Roma children into educational institutions. Schools frequently argue that non-Roma parents do not want their children to be placed in classes with Roma students. Sometimes, even the simple act of Roma and non-Roma children playing together in the same schoolyard during recess is frowned upon. While it is not our intention to judge, it must be acknowledged that the majority society plays a key role in maintaining segregation. Even in the 21st century, we still struggle to see one another simply as human beings rather than judging each other based on ethnic background.

Roma Children in Integration-Based Education

Gábor Nagy and József Juhász defined the concept of integration in the 1985 edition of the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Hungarian Language* (*Magyar Nyelv Értelmező Kéziszótára*) as follows: "Integration means the assimilation, incorporation, or unification of separate parts into a larger whole or unit."'(O. Nagy and Juhász, eds., 1985, p. 596)

In the context of education, ResearchGate provides the following definition: Integration is to integrate a person in a school activity with other students for a specific time. It focuses on a separate system (ResearchGate, n.d., para. 3).

The 21K School's definition discusses integration in the context of inclusion. Integration is a step toward inclusion, but it's not the entire picture. Under this arrangement, students who have special needs or learning differences are integrated into regular classrooms. But the system that surrounds them might still be unchanged (21K School, n.d., para. 2).

Surdu, Vincze, and Wamsiedel claims that there is also a growing demand for integrated education among Roma parents. According to a 2005 study conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in five Central European countries (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia), an average of 58.9% of Roma parents across these countries expressed a desire for their children to attend schools together with children from the majority population. In Romania, this figure was 54.2%, meaning that more than half of Roma parents believed that integrated education would be more beneficial for their children. By 2010, a new survey found that 72.7% of Roma parents (out of a sample of 985) preferred mixed classrooms, even though only about half of the respondents' children attended such classes (Surdu, Vincze & Wamsiedel, 2011, p. 66).

In order to benefit from a high standard of education, Roma children must have the opportunity to attend kindergartens and schools that are also attended by children from the majority population. Roma parents themselves widely share this view.

' Author's own translation

As highlighted in Emese K. Nagy's study *The Education of Roma Students: Integrated Education and Teacher Preparedness*, integration is significantly hindered by the lack of professionals with appropriate qualifications, practical experience, and dedication—individuals who could effectively support Roma children's adaptation within the school system. Governments should implement policies to eliminate educational segregation [...] and promote inclusive education. Teacher training programs should focus on equipping educators with better tools to support Roma students (Nagy, 2025, p. 7).

Additionally, the financial situation of educational institutions plays a significant role. There is often no capacity to hire dedicated staff to support and assist Roma students. For example, the presence of pedagogical assistants who speak the Romani language could greatly improve the students' motivation, their educational experience, and their trust in teachers. Mihaela Zatreanu also emphasizes the importance of Romani language proficiency in education in her study, *The Importance of Romani Language Learning and Teaching for a More Inclusive Education for All*. The presence of the Romani language in schools should not only be a symbolic choice, but a conscious decision ... enabling the training and employment of Roma teachers, training of non-Roma teachers from the perspective of educational Romanipen (Zatreanu, 2021, p. 4)

According to Horváth and Toma (2006), the educational integration of Roma children needs to be rethought—new definitions and approaches should be introduced. The aim should be to ensure that these students feel welcomed and included in educational institutions and are embraced within the broader cultural landscape.

Roma also need to strengthen their identity and foster cooperation with their families and the communities they come from. Unfortunately, the current education system does not support this goal—indeed, it is often perceived as obstructing Roma students' success. One major issue is the system's rigidity and overregulation. Most Roma children enter school without having attended kindergarten, making it nearly impossible to expect them to adapt and perform according to rigid curricular standards.′(Roth & Moisa, 2011).

The Concept of Inclusion in the Context of Educating Roma Children

Istvánné Fülöp defines the concept of inclusion as follows: Inclusion means acceptance. Inclusive education is a fundamental institutional approach that fully considers children's and students' individual differences—whether social, cultural, or biological—and builds upon these differences to create an inclusive environment regarding personnel, infrastructure, and pedagogy. This environment ensures the implementation of the threefold principle of effectiveness, efficiency, and equity."′(Fülöp, 2014, p. 7).

In her study *Defining Inclusionary Education: A Review of Recent Literature*, Melissa Dockrill Garrett cites Veck's definition. Veck (2014) defined inclusion to be when

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'specialized instructional practices and settings are eliminated in education' (p. 452), focusing instead on embracing learner differences, creating equal opportunities for all learners, and ensuring that educators take collective responsibility for all learners (Veck, 2014, as cited in Garrett, 2022, p. 452).

The 2024 definition by the Oxford Review is one of the most recent sources discussing this concept. Inclusive education is an approach that ensures all students have equal access to quality education by removing barriers and providing the necessary adaptations to support diverse learning needs (Oxford Review, 2024).

The concept of inclusion represents a higher level of integration. It presupposes an educational system grounded in respect for human rights and accessible to all, regardless of ethnic background. Inclusive education does not simply refer to placing students from different backgrounds in the same classroom; it requires a systemic transformation. Changes are necessary so Roma children can also effectively participate in learning. Inclusive educational strategies mean not merely integrating Roma children into mixed groups while maintaining traditional methods but consciously adapting teaching strategies and providing the necessary resources to ensure all students reach their full potential.

The European Commission's INCLUD-ED project (2006–2011) revealed that children who participated in inclusive education achieved significantly better academic results than those who did not. The findings showed that inclusion overcomes all forms of segregation and has a positive impact not only on academic achievement but also on social behavior. The report highlights the critical role of human resources—mediators and educators—who support children with specific learning or other special needs. To achieve this, it is necessary to recognize cultural and educational differences among children, for teachers to apply inclusive teaching methods, and for the required financial support to be available' (Roth & Moisa, 2011).

The process of differentiation must play a central role in education for the successful implementation of inclusion. Learning social behavior norms in a diverse, heterogeneous community becomes much easier for Roma children. Values and behavioral norms largely develop through the examples observed in one's environment. In ethnically mixed groups, children tend to follow the dominant behavioral models. It is important for them not to encounter only Roma role models in their daily lives but also to see and learn other behavioral patterns.

Inclusion appears to be the most viable long-term solution for the Roma population to become fully integrated members of society. If children grow up in mixed groups and communities from preschool age, this normalization of diversity may ease their future integration into the majority society. As a result, their access to the labor market could

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become smoother, equality of opportunity more achievable, and discrimination reduced—ultimately fostering lifelong inclusion′ (INCLUD-ED, 2007).

This leads us to an essential question: Is there an optimal solution, and if so, what is it? Which strategy would most effectively strengthen the relationship between Roma children and the educational system, improve academic performance, and ensure that Roma children are present in education from an early age, even as young as three? If we examine the available options more closely, we can see that all three approaches— segregation, integration, and inclusion—have advantages and disadvantages. However, it is crucial to recognize that identifying the appropriate strategy is only possible if Roma children can enter the education system in the first place. This brings us to a key question: What can we do to ensure Roma children are admitted into educational institutions? Once we can answer that satisfactorily, we will be better positioned to choose the approach that best supports their development.

However, examining these perspectives solely from a theoretical standpoint is not enough. In many areas of life, while theoretical models may provide useful insights, their practical implementation often differs significantly from the theory.

Segregation, Integration, and Inclusion - Sampling and Institutional Research in Harghita County

Between 2020 and 2024, I participated in a research project that stood between the fields of sociology, education and Romani studies. The study examined the factors influencing the institutional attendance of Roma children of preschool age in Harghita County. During the research process, I visited kindergartens across four major regions of Harghita County: Odorheiu - Secuiesc, Miercurea Ciuc, Gheorgheni, and the Cristuru - Secuiesc area.

Throughout the fieldwork, I visited several kindergartens in Harghita County, observing both segregated and integrated groups. I chose Harghita County for the sampling because I live here and have the opportunity to observe the day-to-day lives of the Roma, as well as the everyday lives of the teachers who work with Roma children in this County. This way, apart from the theoretical approach, I also have practical experience working with Roma children in Harghita County. The sampling procedure was based on the structured and unstructured interviews recorded in audio format. The two target groups consisted of parents of Roma children of preschool age and the kindergarten teachers working with Romachildren. The geographical scope of the sampling was Harghita County. I divided Harghita County into four main regions: the Odorheiu - Secuiesc, Cristuru - Secuiesc, Miercurea - Ciuc, and Gheorgheni. The sample included six institutions from five different areas across four regions of Harghita County. In Odorheiu Secuiesc, I visited both urban and rural institutions simultaneously, whereas, in the other regions, I visited either a single urban or rural kindergarten. The main reason

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behind this was the fact that in the given areas, those were the only institutions that admitted Roma children. The sampling locations (preschools working with Roma children in the selected settlements) were chosen based on a clearly defined set of criteria: I visited kindergartens with which I had previous experience, existing points of connection, and where I knew there would be a greater openness to participating in the research.

Due to the desegregation law currently in force in Romania, this was an important consideration, as it is officially prohibited to educate Roma children in a segregated manner. However, in practice, this remains the most widely applied educational strategy for Roma communities. As a result, many institutions are wary of inspections, and school management tends to be reluctant to engage with any unfamiliar or external initiatives. The existing points of connection, however, helped ensure that the partner preschools were willing to participate in the research.

Another practical consideration I had to take into account was that most institutions are dismissive toward Roma students; only a few are willing to take on the education of Roma children of preschool age. In places where this does happen, the kindergarten often becomes an institution attended exclusively by Roma children. These are the institutions I sought out within the geographical boundaries of Harghita County.

Both urban and rural areas must be represented in the research through the selected sampling locations. While segregated education is dominant in urban settings, in rural areas, there are occasional examples of integrated kindergarten groups. Both the urban and rural character of Harghita County are significant, so I can only obtain results that provide a more complete and accurate picture of reality by involving both types of institutions.

A total of 15 teachers and 51 Roma parents participated in the process. In compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), I ensured the anonymity of the institutions participating in the research, the teachers working there, and the parents who were interviewed. However, as the director of the Ficánka Kindergarten, I did not feel that confidentiality was necessary in the case of the institution I lead. The kindergarten openly committed to supporting this research process; therefore, anonymity was provided only to the staff working there and to the parents of the Roma children attending the institution. The results indicated that the majority of Roma preschool children in Harghita County are enrolled in segregated educational settings. Instances of integrated education were observed in only two locations: at the Ficánka Kindergarten in Odorheiu - Secuiesc and in an anonymous kindergarten in the region of Odorhei.

Segregated Early Childhood Education at the Ficánka Kindergarten

Ficánka Kindergarten provides Roma children with the opportunity to learn in integrated groups. Ten years ago, we launched the "Chance for Them Too" program, which placed special emphasis on integrating Roma children.

Parents can decide whether to enroll their children in segregated or integrated groups. Experience shows that factors such as family background, financial situation, and the level of trust or mistrust toward institutions play a key role in shaping their decision. In practice, most parents choose segregated education due to the reasons mentioned above.

The spontaneous interviews with the teachers working in the segregated group at the Ficánka Kindergarten revealed some surprising perspectives.

According to our first interviewee, integrated education may not necessarily be better than segregated education, as Roma culture and the behavioral patterns differ significantly from the mainstream norms. The teacher believes that the problem does not lie in the Roma children's ability to adapt but instead in the majority society's ongoing inability to accept minorities. The family circumstances and broader environment from which Roma children come also influence the process of integration. The teacher emphasized that Roma children often struggle to keep up academically with their majority peers, leading to a higher dropout rate.

Our second interviewee, who teaches in the segregated group of the Ficánka Kindergarten, drawing from rural experiences, explained that good relationships between Roma and Hungarians can develop in small village communities where everyone knows each other. It is common for Roma individuals to assist Hungarians with agricultural work. However, the interviewee believes this model cannot be replicated in larger towns such as Odorheiu - Secuiesc. In their opinion, integration in more populous settlements is not feasible, partly due to the attitude of the Hungarian majority and partly due to the Roma community's persecution complex. The Roma often feel excluded and looked down upon by the majority—a sentiment that has some basis in reality—but they also tend to cry wolf even in situations where no real problem exists.

An Examination of Segregated Education at an Anonymous Rural Kindergarten in the Cristuru – Secuiesc region

Similar perspectives emerged during interviews with teachers working with Roma children in the Cristuru-Secuiesc region. According to our interviewee, the initial integration of Roma children faced significant difficulties, as members of the majority community were not prepared for the steps required for successful integration.

Over time, the majority of families began withdrawing their children from kindergarten when the "housed Roma"[2] children started attending the institution. Our interviewee, who has been working there for twenty years, witnessed this phenomenon and shared the information with me during the interview. There is no exact period – this was a long but, unfortunately, inevitable process. Gradually, from year to year, all Hungarian children were withdrawn, and only the housed Roma children remained. A

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[2]   The term "housed Roma" refers to a group of Romani people with better financial status.

further shift occurred when children from the Roma colony' also began attending. In response, the housed Roma families started withdrawing their children as well. Today, Hungarian families and wealthier housed Roma families prefer to enroll their children in the kindergarten of the nearby town. As a result, only the children from the Roma colony currently attend the rural kindergarten near Cristuru - Secuiesc. The housed Roma families identify as Hungarian and do not want their children attending kindergarten with the Roma children living in the colony, while the Roma people living in the colony fully embrace their Roma identity.

The kindergarten teachers concluded that education within a segregated group yields much more effective results than forced integration. According to Romanian Law 198/2023, segregation in education, particularly against Roma children, is prohibited. However, as the case in the Cristuru- Secuiesc area demonstrates, segregation and discrimination are often chosen by the Roma community itself. In Roma communities, families often live according to a strong caste system, and those belonging to higher castes do not want to mix with those from lower castes. This leads to situations where parents from higher castes withdraw their children from kindergarten if children from lower-caste families begin to attend the same institution. The academic literature refers to this phenomenon as *separation* when one Roma group distances itself from another Roma group. The different Roma groups not only remain separate from one another, but often sharply distinguish themselves. They frequently define their own identity by emphasizing their differences from other Roma groups (Szuhay, 2012).

Michael Kozubik's scientific work - Social Structure in a Roma Settlement: Comparison over Time – provides insight into this significant aspect. The most vulnerable group of the segregated and separated Roma communities are the 'degesa' … they inhabit segregated settlements and they are excluded by their own ethnic group (Kozubik, 2020). In our case, Housed Roma families withdrew their children once the Roma children from the colony started attending.'

Initially, the teachers feared inspections and penalties. Thus, they meticulously documented all steps of their pedagogical work to demonstrate that integration efforts had been made, even though reality diverged from their initial plans. When they faced the phenomenon of the White Flight and intraethnic separation, they had to accept the fact, that in this context, integration is not an option. In the beginning, they tried to teach the hungarian and the Housed Roma together, and than the White Flight phenomenon occurred. Only the Housed roma children remained in the kindergarten. When the members of the lower Roma casts attended their children too, the intraethnic separation appeared. Today, the kindergarten has only Roma children of the lower casts. This way,

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' We use the term colony to describe a place outside the town or village where only the poor Roma people live.

' When one roma group voluntarily segregates itself from another group of romas, we call it separation.

where different roma groups don't want to be next to each other, it is impossible to expect that the members of the majority society will accept the Roma.

The kindergarten teachers emphasized that instead of punishment, they should be recognized and rewarded for their perseverance and dedication in such a challenging environment. They also pointed out that lawmakers are often familiar only with theoretical aspects, and the mandatory directives they establish do not function effectively in practice. A proper understanding of this complex issue can only come from those who work daily within Roma communities and witness their living conditions, habits, and persistent challenges.

A Case Study of Integrated Education at an Anonymous Rural Kindergarten in the Odorheiu - Secuiesc region

The perspectives shared by the kindergarten teacher working in an integrated group at an anonymous rural kindergarten in the Odorheiu - Secuiesc area were equally surprising. The given institution includes 2 or 3 Roma children in the group alongside Hungarian children: roma children eat and learn together with the Hungarians.

According to our interviewee, Roma children, even at the kindergarten level, prefer to stay together in one group, playing with each other and showing strong attachment. They find it more difficult to integrate into groups with a majority of children and generally show little desire to mix with Hungarian peers. Once they become accustomed to a teacher, they develop a strong attachment to them—more so than is typically observed among Hungarian children.

The kindergarten teacher also reported a peculiar phenomenon. At the beginning of the school year, Roma children tend to be charming, kind, helpful, and somewhat shy. However, their behavior changes noticeably as time progresses: they become more disobedient. While initially adhering to group rules, they begin to test boundaries over time. They are often less responsive to teachers' instructions from the second semester onwards.

There are circulating rumors that Hungarian children will be withdrawn from kindergarten due to the increasing number of Roma children entering the groups. This trend is reportedly mirrored in schools as well.

Our interviewee expressed hope that these rumors will not materialize; however, it was noted that the majority of parents are dissatisfied with the current situation.

Formulating Long-term Goals and Conceptualizing an Ideal Future Scenario

In Romania, the National Strategy for the 2014–2020 period included the economic and educational integration of the Roma population. Key elements of the education strategy were reducing the educational attainment gap between Roma and non-Roma populations, decreasing school-based discrimination and segregation, providing social services to mitigate economic disadvantages, and increasing the proportion of children participating in after-school programs.

The Ficánka Kindergarten in Odorheiu-Secuiesc was among the first institutions to commit to integrating the city's Roma population into the educational system. According to the philosophy upheld by our institution's management and kindergarten teachers, respect for diversity and the provision of equal opportunities are fundamental values that every educational institution should guarantee for preschool-aged children. We launched an opportunity-creating program entitled "A Chance for Them Too!" through which we succeeded in opening the Kézenfogva Inclusive Kindergarten

The newly established Kézenfogva Inclusive Kindergarten provides disadvantaged children living in extreme poverty with a family-like, welcoming, and calm environment, in line with European Union standards.

It is a unique national institution, offering modern facilities and an inclusive educational approach designed explicitly for disadvantaged Roma children. Although the children attending this kindergarten are not placed in mixed groups, the setting cannot be classified as a segregated education.

Thanks to the kindergarten's facilities, the high-quality equipment, and the professional expertise of the kindergarten teachers, the children at Kézenfogva Inclusive Kindergarten can develop under the same conditions as Hungarian and Romanian children attending majority institutions

According to the data collected through the Educational Barometer survey: "The infrastructural facilities of segregated, Roma-majority educational institutions are generally below average. Schools without Roma students are the best equipped with modern teaching tools, while segregated or Roma-majority schools are the least equipped." (Sólyom & Kiss, 2023, p.48).

This excerpt is drawn from the Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma in Harghita County. As the quote illustrates, institutions operating with segregated education models are disadvantaged regarding equipment and overall effectiveness. However, this statement does not apply to the Ficánka Kindergarten in Odorheiu- Secuiec: the institution offers high-standard education supported by modern technological tools for Roma children. One example is the "Godfather Program," during which I contacted local entrepreneurs in Odorheiu - Secuiesc to finance daily meals for the children attending the Kézenfogva Inclusive Kindergarten.

As a result, each child received a warm lunch every day as part of the kindergarten program. Our long-term goal is the full implementation of an inclusive educational strategy, though we recognize that achieving this goal will require years and decades of dedicated work.

´   Author's own translation

Conclusion

Although the academic literature discussing these three concepts provides valuable insights, a significant gap exists between theoretical considerations and practical implementation. The persistent segregation practices in the education of Roma children are the result of deeply embedded social and institutional mechanisms that go beyond the boundaries of the educational system.

The advantages of integrated education—particularly growing demand among Roma parents for inclusive school environments—clearly underline the necessity of desegregation. Recognizing the internal heterogeneity of Roma communities, as well as addressing intercultural differences sensitively, are indispensable prerequisites for genuine inclusion. Segregated educational practices are not only problematic from legal and ethical standpoints, but they also undermine long-term opportunities for social mobility. Integration efforts can only be practical if they manifest not merely in structural interventions but also in a fundamental shift in mindset—on the part of educational institutions, teachers, and policymakers alike. Inclusive education that is culturally responsive serves not only the interests of Roma communities but also contributes to the strengthening of social cohesion. Achieving this is a strategically important task at both national and European levels.

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