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Reading Tales – an Informal Educational Practice for Social Change

“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”
– Ludwig Wittgenstein

Abstract

School is an institution that translates socio-economic differences into distinct educational outcomes. In the case of Roma children, schools perform a negative selection, often by tracking Roma into segregated classes and schools and directing many of them into special education. Negative selection is often justified by reference to poor reading skills and limited vocabulary in the language of school instruction. Since schools fail to be inclusive institutions and attempts to improve educational outcomes of Roma students have been of limited effect, interventions at the family level appear as relevant alternative to decrease educational inequality. The “Your Story” (Meséd) project, through which mothers develop a routine of reading stories to their children, is proving an effective step for developing mothers’ parenting abilities and involvement in their children’s education, as well as in improving children’s reading skills and school achievement, increasing their vocabulary and supporting them in developing a positive attitude towards reading and overall education.

Keywords: *Early childhood education, parental involvement, reading tales, Roma children, educational policy*

Zusammenfassung

Die Schule ist eine Institution, die sozioökonomische Ungleichheit in ungleiche Bildungsergebnisse transformiert. Im Fall von Roma-Kindern findet eine Negativauslese statt; sie werden häufig in ethnisch segregierte Klassen und Schulen oder sogar in Sonderschulen überwiesen. Diese negative Selektion wird in der Regel durch Referenz auf schwache Lesekompetenzen und geringe Vokabelkenntnisse gerechtfertigt. Vor dem Hintergrund, dass Schulen im Bezug auf Inklusion bisher versagt haben und Versuche, die Bildungsergebnisse von Roma-Kindern und -Jugendlichen zu verbessern, bislang nur mäßigen Erfolg hatten, erscheinen Interventionen auf der Ebene der Familie als mögliche Alternative zur Verringerung von Bildungsungleichheit. Das Projekt „Deine Geschichte“ (Meséd) stärkt die Erziehungskompetenz und die Beteiligung von Müttern sowie die Lesekompetenz und Lesemotivation von Kindern durch das Erlernen von Routinen des gemeinsamen Vorlesens.

Schlüsselworte: *Frühkindliche Bildung, Zusammenarbeit mit Eltern, Vorlesen, Roma-Kinder, Bildungspolitik*

The reproduction of social inequality within the educational system

The increase in the number of students who reach tertiary education in Central and Eastern European countries suggests democratization in the domain of education: education is for all. But even if they achieve similar levels of education, individuals from social different strata will likely find themselves at different levels on the social hierarchy stemming from their inherited socio-economic status rather than on their achieved educational status (see, for example, Jencks et al. 1972; Boudon 1974; Bowles/Gents 1976; Breen/Goldthorpe 2001).

School plays an important role in creating and maintaining social inequalities because it arbitrarily imposes and values the habitus characteristics of the dominant classes and assigns an inferior status to, and devaluates the habitus of, the dominated classes (Bourdieu/Passeron 1977). By the largely exclusive recognition of the dominant class’s culture as having a unique and universal value, pupils from the lower class are put by the school into a disadvantaged situation. In Bourdieu’s view, the educational system has as a main function the reproduction of a cultural status quo which reflects the domination of the upper class.

An insidious criterion used by schools which serves in negative selection among pupils coming from different socio-economic backgrounds is language acquisition. In his revised theory of language and pedagogical codes, Bernstein (2000) asserts that schools encourage and reward an elaborated linguistic code while sanctioning the usage of restricted or limited vocabulary. The restricted language code (including a limited academic vocabulary) is thus responsible for the inferior school achievements of children coming from poor and working class families.

School exclusion appears at an early age in the form of evaluation tests that rely on vocabulary acquisitions in family socialization. To be prepared for this filtering process, children coming from poor families need to be directed towards an elaborated linguistic code from the earliest possible stages in order to pass this initial hurdle encountered in the school system. Acquiring and enriching vocabulary and language use is crucial

because it first decreases the probability of negative selection into special education at the initial school stage and, secondly, contributes to educational success in the long run.

Roma children's school career

Research focusing on the general low educational achievements of Roma¹ populations has taken off in the last two decades since the revival of the conceptualization of Roma ethnicity by politicians, scholars and Roma activists. "Gypsies"² were studied in some communist regimes (Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) and not even mentioned in others (Bulgaria and Romania), but after communism's fall in Europe in the 1990s, the Roma population became a salient object of study.

Most of the studies focusing on Roma education have concluded that a consistent segment of Roma pupils has lower levels of educational attainment than their counterparts from the majority population. Policy studies indicate that a significant proportion of Roma children are not enrolled or drop out early from the educational system (Save the Children 2001; UNDP 2002; Ringold/Orenstein/Wilkens 2005; EUMC 2006; UNICEF 2007; OSCE/ODIHR 2010; FRA/UNDP 2012; Bennet 2012; Brüggemann 2012). From the body of policy research addressing Roma education, it could be seen as a conclusion that Roma are bounded into an essentialism with two mutually supportive and reinforcing strands: the Roma do not like school and schools do not like the Roma.

Until recently, basic research assumptions implied that Roma children's low rate of school participation is partially a result of parental disinterest in formal education, low parental involvement in school life, lack of resources for sustaining children in school, low educational aspirations and a general mistrust of the school system. What has been less explored is a possible reluctance of some Roma parents to interact with school staff and with other parents due to a mix of ethnic stigma and lack of self-confidence resulting from their often poor economic and educational status (Surdu 2010).

Teachers usually hold low expectations for Roma children and the acquisition of basic skills such as literacy and numeracy is sometimes considered an achievement or an objective to be reached rather than a common developmental outcome as for other students. The same low expectations of Roma children can even be found in the EU policy papers. Although Roma's completion of primary education is considered an EU Roma integration priority and "ambitious" goal ("Ensure that all Roma children complete at least primary school", EC 2011, 5), this objective seems rather a weak one in light of the fact that the completion of primary education is insufficient to improve Roma's employment prospects (Friedman 2013). Low objectives promote low achievements.

When it is not simply an arbitrary act of discrimination or a hidden administrative practice, the segregation of Roma children into separate classes and schools is often justified in terms of their vocabulary gap and lack of proficiency in the official language of instruction, which in turn requires their early separation in order to administer language-related corrective interventions. In light of the widespread educational segregation of Roma in the school systems of Central and Eastern Europe, early childhood education (both in the family and in the formal environment) has come to be seen as a practice of utmost im-

portance in preventing segregation in general and avoiding placement in special education in particular.

Educationalists have started to consider the involvement of parents in school life and their level of aspiration for children's educational achievements as very important for the pupils' school careers (Epstein/Salinas 2004; Fan/Chen 2001; Sheldon/Epstein 2004). From this perspective, it appears to be most important to work early with families and children coming from disadvantaged homes and to set cognitive foundations for children to start their educational paths on a more equal footing with children from more privileged families.

In this article, we try to dispel the narrative of educationally hopeless Roma children by showing how small actions at early educational stages can help them to better find their way in the school environment and to perform tasks on par with their non-Roma peers. A hopeful example of how this might be achieved through addressing early socialization at home will be described in the fourth part of the article. Roma children's poor educational background could be countervailed not by an emphasis on measurement and diagnosis, but rather through less costly investment in early childhood education.

Benefits and effects of reading stories to children

Reading stories to children is a social and socializing practice well developed in middle-class families (Phillips/McNaughton 1990; Mol/Bus/de Jong 2009). Numerous early childhood studies (Sénéchal/LeFevre 2002; Sénéchal 2006b; Arama/Fine/Zivc 2013) demonstrate that parents reading to their children and a shared reading context have an overall positive impact on children's literacy or their reading achievement, as well as on children's vocabulary. Reading stories can be also seen as a universal meta-language between parents and child with beneficial effects on both of them. Mothers have the potential for creating the instructional "scaffolding", a form of tutoring (Wood/Bruner/Ross 1976) which is similar to the zone of proximal development as conceptualized by Vygotski (1997).

Reading stories as a tutorial practice initiated by parents is a promising way to establish an effective educational platform because of the generally greater level of attachment and intimacy between parent and child as compared to that of teacher and child. Because closeness to family and especially to the mother is perceived by the child as more secure than any other relationship, it provides a sound basis for "dialogical" learning (in Freire's [1996] terms). The particular liaison with the mother ensures an informal learning which is not only natural par excellence, but also extraordinarily fruitful.

Parents are the best mediators between the informal, oral language and the instructional, written language inculcated at a later stage through formal education. As an extension of the everyday use of the oral language, reading books appears as a major step forward literacy acquisition and language development. Children who have been read to before attending school are better prepared for the transition to compulsory education, face more easily the tasks and problem solving requested by teachers, and have a higher rate of success in educational settings than children not exposed to early reading (Raikes et al. 2006, Bus/van Ijzendoorn/Pellegrini 1995; Burgess/Hecht/Lonigan 2002).

The main contribution of reading books to children's success in school is the development of vocabulary, which constitutes an important step in learning to read and to express the self (Bus/van IJzendoorn 1988, Sénéchal/LeFevre 2002). In a recent meta-analysis gathering data from six intervention studies on 408 subjects, Dunst/Simkus/Hamby (2012, 3) concluded that "shared reading interventions were effective in promoting the infants' and toddlers' expressive and receptive language and that the benefits were more positive the earlier the interventions were started and the longer they were implemented. Results also showed the interventions had longer term benefits."

In sum, reading stories is an indirect and – when it includes discussing the stories with the child – interactive process of learning through which the child is exposed to knowledge in an informal and affectionate way. This process is beneficial not only for the children but also for their parents, a fact less documented by existing studies. The project presented in the next section emphasizes that reading stories for children is a pleasurable and recreational activity for parents, too, which also has an important role in stress reduction and increasing self-confidence and self-esteem.

A critical educational praxis: the "Your Story" project in Hungary

This section focuses on reading stories to children as a key activity implemented in six locations in Hungary in the framework of the multi-country project "A Good Start".³ The project was implemented during 2010–2012 by the Roma Education Fund and partners and ran in 16 localities of four countries of Europe (Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, and Slovakia).

Project context

Illiteracy and functional illiteracy are common among young Roma mothers with low socio-economic status at the six project sites. The great majority of these women dropped out of the school system at an early stage and met with little or no success or encouragement in their few years of schooling. They therefore lacked basic skills in reading and the confidence to read aloud. Moreover, prior to this project there was not much interest shown on the part of the Roma mothers targeted by the project to attend any kind of remedial courses which require them to attend conventional classes, listen to lectures, and write examinations.

Motherhood sometimes starts very early among the Roma from traditional communities. Being burdened with the responsibilities of caring for a baby, many young Roma women from this project consider the learning period in their life to have ended and see neither reason nor hope for furthering their learning after becoming mothers, such that the desire and skill to learn become buried. Additionally, the mothers' own negative experiences with formal education leave them poorly prepared to set a course for the growth of their children. Finally, there are often few books available in their home.

Project goals

The "Your Story" project aims to gently break the cycle of exclusion and felt inferiority, starting with women as agents of change. To this end, the project seeks to create in mothers an ability and yearning to read and learn which will be naturally transferred to

their children, who become direct beneficiaries of the project by being read to at home. At a basic level, the project improves the mothers' relationship with books and learning by creating a positive association which will be passed on to their children. Through participatory methods of reading and discussing children's stories, the mothers gain skills that can be put to practice immediately with their children at home. Participation in the project activities also helps the mothers to develop self-knowledge, self-confidence, creativity and collaboration in the context of a community of mothers. By organizing weekly sessions to teach skills in reading simple children's stories and assigning the reading of the same story to their children every evening during the week, the "Your Story" project attempts to improve children's skills and to build parenting confidence at a fundamental level.

Project description

The "Your Story" project uses alternative methods of learning to promote education and a culture of learning and development among participants in the project. "Your Story" utilizes a participatory, skill-oriented approach which is readily applicable and has a visible, positive effect on the children of the participants as well as on the mothers whom it targets directly.

With the support of local authorities at each project site, groups were formed each consisting of between eight and 15 Roma mothers each. The mothers selected were aged between 17 and 45 years and had one to four children in the age range of zero to seven years. The selected persons, most of whom had not completed more than lower secondary education (ISCED 2), take part in joint sessions of reading stories aloud. The sessions are led by a facilitator, in most of the cases a Roma woman from the local community, with the training provided to the facilitators focused on adult learning methods and on developing abilities to serve as supportive, friendly and non-judgmental tutors.

The role of the facilitator is to engage mothers in the reading exercise, acting as a tutor to strengthen their reading ability and encouraging them to develop their skills to express themselves, while fostering a sense of community and openness through interactions and sharing of experiences among the mothers. The tutoring role is supposed to be transferred afterwards from the mothers to their children. Having Roma women as facilitators also provided the Roma participants with a gainfully employed role model engaged in meaningful work.

The Roma mothers' groups meet weekly for a two-hour session over two phases of three months each. In the first part of each session, Roma mothers receive a new story book for their children. Story books are chosen based on their content so as to transmit moral values through the feelings and behaviors of the characters. The mothers explore the stories together with the facilitators, who guide the reading by initiating discussion starting from the elements of the stories (words, pictures and their meanings). Where as the first phase concentrated on developing mothers' reading skills and re-establishing mothers' confidence in reading, in the second phase the element of writing was added and the use of arts including drawing and painting encouraged. With greater proficiency in reading and writing, some mothers engaged in writing stories of their own. Additionally, role plays were used to develop skills in handling challenging situations in daily life such as communicating with kindergarten teachers, doctors, and authorities.

Research evaluation of “Your Story”

The evaluation⁴ of “Your Story” in Hungary was carried out in two localities and encompassed 105 women that took part in reading group sessions. Qualitative evaluation was based on observation and on individual and group discussions. Quantitative findings consisted in preliminary analysis of data from the household survey conducted in early 2011 with all families engaged in AGS activities. In all localities of the 2011 “Your Story” projects (implemented in the framework of AGS) in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Macedonia, all Roma mothers of children aged 0–6 filled out baseline questionnaires. Participants in the project were chosen randomly from this population, with the control group consisting of those mothers who were not drawn to participate. Of the women who participated in the evaluation, 19 % of mothers had not completed lower secondary education while 67 % had completed no more than that level. Only 9 women had completed upper secondary education and just one woman higher education.

One of the major achievements of the participants in the reading group sessions was an improvement in attitudes towards learning in general. Three quarters of the treatment group (76 %) report that they believe children do better at school if they attended kindergarten or other educational programmes before starting primary school. Only 54 % of the control group shared this attitude. This finding could in turn be interpreted as a benefit for young children in the household, as supported by the additional finding that 4-year old children in the treatment group outperformed children from the control group in several skills. Additionally, enrolment in the kindergarten of 3–6 years old children improved during the project among all children in general, but significantly more in the treatment group.

Concerning the mothers participating in the project, SGI researchers reported that, at the end of the project, parents in the treatment group value more pre-school education and have higher expectations for their children attending higher levels of education than parents in the control group. A higher number of treatment group parents claimed they could read anything without difficulty at the end of the project than did parents in the control group, while at the baseline the two groups did not differ in this regard. In addition, in a reading exercise at the survey’s conclusion, the treatment group mothers had a higher share of A-readers (ability to read anything without any problems) than did mothers in the control group. The researchers also reported that, while there was no difference between the two groups in terms of motivation to find employment, the treatment group mothers were more motivated to attend some forms of education. Additionally, the treatment group mothers reported that “most often their relationship to their children improved (84 %), they could relax and have fun, found new friends and community and became more self-confident as a parent (75 %). Furthermore, 59 % of parents feel they have changed: they are more self-confident, more responsible, understand their children better and are spending more time with them.”

Challenges

Beyond the need for further research, several questions need to be addressed. While the approach taken in “Your Story” shows considerable promise in helping pave the way towards a more

educationally inclined and prepared disadvantaged Roma women, there are challenges regarding the scope of applicability of this project. It is clear that “Your Story” works well with Roma parents who have a certain level of literacy and are motivated to participate. In order to make it accessible to those layers of Roma society that are virtually illiterate, however, there is a need for added elements at the level of methodology. In many cases, this more deprived group of Roma lives in hopeless poverty and is in need of basic assistance in the form of food and clothing. Providing some of this assistance in the context of this project could be a motivating factor to get these deeply discouraged and untrusting mothers involved.

Another challenge in this project is to sustain the regular participation of mothers. In order to keep the sessions attractive, the selection of Roma facilitators and the quality of their training are of paramount importance. Mentoring and accompaniment of these facilitators have proven important in keeping their enthusiasm high and in continuously developing the skills needed in each particular situation. Although this is a costly process, it has proven to be essential.

Another challenge sometimes faced implementing “Your Story” is resistance from local authorities. Examples of such resistance include mayors not providing a suitable venue or schools and kindergartens not allowing Roma mothers to lead story reading sessions with the pupils. This latter part of “Your Story”, when not impeded, has added much to changing the image of Roma mothers within the majority and in developing the mothers’ self-confidence.

It may be that gains made through the successful “Your Story” participants will have a significant effect on the Roma community as a whole and the way it is viewed by the society at large. Initial successes show the way for others who at first may be reluctant to sign up. There are currently plans to tailor “Your Story” sessions to groups of fathers. This will compliment the progress of mothers’ groups and reinforce the impact on the children. There has already been one “Your Story” group in Macedonia that included fathers as well as mothers, pointing to hopeful prospects for more such groups.

Conclusions

Due to its creative and informal character, the “Your Story” project has proved attractive for Roma mothers with at least basic literacy skills who had previously interrupted their school career. The project strengthened mothers’ parenting skills, improved their attitudes towards learning and education and helped them to develop vocabulary and language acquisitions in their children. Reading tales contribute to children’s cognitive development increasing their chances of being enrolled in mainstream schools and of following longer educational paths. The reading tales as an informal learning activity is usually accompanied by improvements on children’s vocabulary and language acquisitions, on memory and process of thinking and concept formation. Moreover, the dialogue between children and mothers, and the general supportive and flexible context of the reading tales activity have a positive impact for the social and emotional development of children. Although the project first addressed mothers, it could be considered a family-level intervention and a possible option to prompt further educational success of Roma students from disadvantaged background as far

as the school system proves to be exclusive and elitist. Reading tales can be seen as an informal educational practice which, scaled up, could become a tool for social and educational change, thus overcoming the drawbacks of the conservative approach of the educational systems of Central and Eastern Europe, which often results in a negative selection with regard to Roma children from poor families.

Notes

- 1 We use the word 'Roma' in this article in the sense given by the policy makers and by much of the academic research: a comprehensive umbrella uniting a broad range of people and groups with diverse cultural, linguistic, occupational, religious patterns and modalities of self-ascription. Although we use the word 'Roma' in order to signal its relevance for policies, the project analyzed as a case study does not pretend relevance for all groups and people subsumed under the label as some of these people are not in need of external interventions with educational projects. Moreover, some non-Roma may benefit from interventions of the type that we describe in this article.
- 2 The denomination 'Gypsies' has been transformed over time into the label 'Roma', with important moments of negotiations among politicians, activists and Roma leaders taking place in the 1930s, 1970s and after 1990s.
- 3 "A Good Start" was supported by the European Union, the Lego Foundation, and the Bernard van Leer foundation.
- 4 The evaluation of the "Your Story" project in the framework of the AGS program was carried out by the Slovak Governance Institute (SGI), which kindly granted the authors with permission to make use of the data presented here.

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