How education helps Roma migrant workers in England on their way to good jobs

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Abstract:

The focus of the article is on the experiences of Roma migrant workers from Slovakia who have moved to England. In the qualitative analysis of the in-depth interviews, the authors focused on their thoughts on education - both their own and in relation to their children. They explored what shaped their current views on the need for education, particularly in terms of their careers. The article also presents three examples to show how opportunities for better jobs can shape the educational aspirations of Roma adults.

Introduction

The Slovak Republic ranks among the European Union countries with the largest number of Roma communities. Data on the share of the Roma population in Slovakia shows that it is around 8% of the total population of approximately 5.4 million inhabitants (Mušinka et al., 2014). A significant share of Roma people live in poverty and face social exclusion. Up to 87% of the population of the so-called marginalised

Roma communities[1] live at risk of poverty (Markovič - Plachá, 2021). Material and financial poverty is directly related to employment. Research on the work experience of Roma people shows that Roma people lag behind the employment rate of the majority population in the long term and are highly represented in the group of the so-called long-term unemployed (the most vulnerable group on the labour market). In 2018, the unemployment rate of Roma people in Slovakia was above 40%, while the average registered unemployment rate in the general population was 5.42% in that period (Hidas et al., 2018). The unemployment rate among Roma people living in marginalised communities is even higher, with findings from 2020 suggesting 23% (Markovič - Plachá, 2021). Education and employment are interlinked. Education is considered to be one of the key factors influencing employment. The educational structure of the Roma population in Slovakia is significantly lower than that of the rest of the population. According to findings from 2012, only 16% of Roma people have higher secondary education (FRA, 2014). Up to 83% of Roma adults living in ethnically homogeneous communities drop out of school early, leaving them with no qualifications (Markovič-Plachá, 2020). The literature agrees that formal education of Roma pupils from weak socio-economic backgrounds can be considered unsuccessful (e.g. Rosinský, 2011; Kusá, 2017 and others).

"One of the main factors with a potentially significant impact on the employment rate is the level of education attained, but the extent of this impact varies between marginalised Roma communities (MRCs) and the general population in Slovakia. While among persons from MRCs of working age with low educational attainment (ISCED 0 to 2) the share of employed persons was 19%, in the total population the employment rate in the same age-education group was 38%. For those with a secondary level of education (ISCED 3 to 4), the share of employed persons in MRCs is 42% and 77% in the total population. The employment of people from MRCs is thus significantly lower than the employment rate of people from the general population with the same education." (Markovič, Plachá, 2020)

Particularly for adult learners, it matters if there are benefits from investments in education, for example in the form of better jobs (e.g., Brown, Bimrose, 2018; Bellare, Smith, Cochran, Lopez, 2023; Lattimore, Steinberg, Zhu, 2023). *"Adults are most often motivated to learn when there is a concrete progression behind their efforts and activity, a desirable change in their work, family or personal life..."* (Lukáč, 2020). According to Lukáč's research (e.g. Lukáč, 2015; Pirohová, Lukáč, Lukáčová, 2019; Lukáč, 2020), Slovak low-skilled Roma adults do not see the point in self-education. *"...they don't see it as something that would help them improve their situation."* (Lukáč, 2020) One's own experience also influences attitudes towards education in relation to children, and therefore it is not surprising that the research team led by Zuzana Kusá (Kusá et al., 2011) found that children from socially and economically weaker family backgrounds are less motivated to learn (and perform well in school) compared to children from middle-class families, and are less ambitious about their education. This is a complex problem, there are many factors that influence the attitudes of Roma people towards education (poor experience with the education system, low expectations from important actors such as teachers, also negative social stigmatisation of Roma as uneducated). We consider a sociological perspective based on the structural disadvantage of Roma people, poverty and social exclusion to be important. Zuzana Kusá (2017) has made a significant contribution to the understanding of the broader circumstances of Roma education in Slovakia through the barriers faced by Roma pupils and their parents. The perspec-

1 Ethnically homogeneous settlement concentrations, inhabited by Roma people (municipal locations, locations on the outskirts of municipalities or at a distance from municipalities), which do not have subjectivity, but administratively belong to nearby municipalities. Approximately half of the Roma population in Slovakia live in such communities.

tive of opportunities is important too, as these act as a motivating factor. The multiple exclusion of Roma people deprives them of opportunities for self-fulfilment, therefore it is understandable that they may not see the point in education.

One of the strategies used by Roma people from Slovakia to secure employment and an overall better quality of life is migration, mainly to Western European countries. Research studies on Roma people in new countries suggest that families are able to adapt to new conditions and secure a decent life if opportunities are available to them (e.g. Grill 2012, 2015, 2016; Chudžíková, et al. 2013; Femlová 2011). In research from 2009, up to 97% of Roma people admitted to the UK and coming from newly acceded countries to the EU community reported that their situation had improved by moving from their country of origin (European Dialogue 2009).

The numbers of cross-border Roma migrant workers from Slovakia are unknown, estimated to be in the tens of thousands in the UK alone. Massive labour migration began in 2004, with the accession of the Slovak Republic to the European Union and the opening of the Western European labour market for Slovak citizens. The target country is mainly the UK. *"Roma from Central and Eastern Europe have formed significant communities across the UK, particularly in the North of England, the Midlands, Kent and North and East London. There are also large Roma communities in Scotland (Glasgow), Wales (Cardiff) and Northern Ireland (Belfast)."* (European Dialogue, 2009). There are several studies available that also look at adult and child education, and it seems that the education systems in the new countries are better able to ensure the inclusion of Roma children than in Slovakia. Criticism of the Slovak education system in relation to Roma migrants in England and Scotland can be heard, for example, in the texts of Mark Payne (2015) or Sime - Fassett (2014).

In this article we present findings from qualitative interviews with Roma adults who moved from Slovakia to England for work. The aim is to find out what they think about education, what shapes their current views on the need for education and what their educational expectations are for their children.

Methods

The article presents findings obtained through qualitative semi-structured interviews with Roma migrant workers who had moved from Slovakia to England. The interviews were conducted in 2022. For the interviews, 25 respondents were approached of whom 15 were women and 10 were men aged between 30 and 60 years. At the time of the interviews, the respondents were living in or near Bradford and came from different regions of Slovakia. In the following chapter, we show how views on education and educational aspirations are reformed under the influence of labour market opportunities, using three "cases". The chapter Discussion presents findings from all the interviews. The findings are intended to serve rather as inspiration for further research; generalisation is not allowed by the nature of the qualitative research, the size of the sample and also the selection, as these are individuals and families who have decided to move to another country for the sake of a better job and a better quality of life, which can be considered a non-standard decision.

Three cases

Three cases of Roma migrants from Slovakia to England show that the possibility of better-paid work can motivate adults to pursue education, even if their experience of the education system is not the best, or if they return to school after decades. These are illustrative examples and cannot be generalised, but they are inspiring in terms of motivating low-skilled and marginalised groups.

Zuzana's case

Basic data about the respondent

Zuzana - female, 38 years old, has lived in England for 7 years, in Slovakia she completed her secondary education with school leaving exam, in England she completed a qualification training for the profession of a teaching assistant (certified) and at the time of the interview she was studying a pedagogical field of study.

History of relocation

She moved to England with her parents to improve her quality of life and get a well-paid job. In Slovakia, she lived in a medium-sized city, had

a bad experience with the education system and the job market *("I thought I wasn't good at anything...").* Family networks helped them to move, they had relatives already living in England.

Job opportunities in Slovakia and England

"*I couldn't find a job in England at first because of my English. I realised that you can't find a suitable job without English."* After completing her first English language course, she got a job as a waitress and later, because of the working conditions, she changed from a service job to a production worker position. *„They offered me different courses... I went to college; I took a few courses there so I could work as an assistant in a school."* The investment in education led to career advancement and the respondent was employed as a teaching assistant." *"I'm still learning, I want to become a teacher."*

Thoughts about education

"Here you can study whatever you want. I've changed my mindset in the few years I've lived here, there are people who have helped me do that." She was offered education at a so-called job centre, which is an institution dedicated to job placement. The respondent confirms the importance of information about learning opportunities. "*An awful lot of people have helped me. I had no way of knowing that I could do courses, that I could get a job other than in a factory."* She declares a change in opinion about the importance of self-education. *"It is worth educating here, not like in Slovakia. In the beginning it took me a while to understand that without English you can't find a good job here. I took a long time to learn in college, first English, then computers, and then courses to be a teaching assistant."*

Eva's case

Basic data about the respondent

Female, 40 years old, has lived in England for 15 years. She completed secondary education with school leaving exam in Slovakia, at the time of the interview, she is studying for a Bachelor's degree in Business and Entrepreneurship.

History of relocation

As in many other cases, Eva and her family were helped to move by relatives who had already been living in England. *"We were invited by my husband's relatives, they said it was good there, that they were doing well, that they were earning good money."* For the first months they lived with these relatives, later they got their own housing. *"If you don't have anyone here it's quite difficult because you need to go to the authorities and if you don't speak English you can't get along. You don't even know who to turn to, who can help you.*"

Job opportunities in Slovakia and England

The respondent could not recall anyone from Slovakia in her area who would not be working in England. According to her experience, everyone can find a job, regardless of education. Only those Slovak Roma people who cannot work due to health reasons, age or the need to care for children or other family members remain unemployed. Or those who do not want to work. Most of all, she appreciates that in England (unlike in Slovakia) Roma people are not disadvantaged in the labour market because of their ethnicity. "*In England, it does not matter whether a person is Roma or not. Even if you don't have qualifications, you still find a job and are happy*." Efforts to upgrade qualifications bring better working conditions. "*All those who put in the effort, educate themselves, work hard and follow everything they are supposed to at work also have the opportunity for career advancement. In most cases, this means, in addition to a better position, a better evaluation* (note: salary evaluation)."

Her own experience has been positive, she is building a career in England and is happy with it. Similarly to Zuzana, she considers it important that migrant workers have access to information about self-development opportunities and educational benefits, as well as support and motivation from a close person or authority figure. In her case, this came from the manager of the real estate firm where she was employed as a cleaner after arriving in England. *"He noticed that I was smart, I learned English. He gave me an assignment to take pictures of what I cleaned up... After a couple of years, I was promoted to a position as some kind of administrative worker. I take pictures of the apartments for the company before renovation and cleaning and then the final condition and then the company puts it up as an advertisement."*

In the future, she and her husband plan to start a business making and selling jewellery.

She says that England gives opportunities to Roma people from Slovakia and *"...it depends on who catches on."* She emphasises the influence of the capital that the migrant brings with him or her from home. *"It also depends on how you lived in Slovakia. What background you came from. There are people who stayed in the same place as when they came. For example, one replenishes goods in a shop and is happy with it. Or works as a cleaner all the time. Because they have not received any basics at home, they don't even have a basic education, and they cannot even read and write properly. They earn enough to live better than they did at home and they are satisfied."*

Thoughts about education

In talking about education and learning, she stresses the need to follow fairly strict rules. *"Even the simpler Roma people here have learned to follow the rules when it comes to children's attendance at school. It was a problem back home in Slovakia, but they had to learn it here. It's strict here. Parents will forcefully bring their children to school because they know that if they are not there at 7.30, they will get a phone call. If a child does not go to school, their benefits will be cut or the child will be taken away from the family. Here, a child under 13 cannot stay home alone. It has already happened that such children have been reported by neighbours and taken away by the authorities. Everyone is very careful in this respect."*

She uses her example to explain how education in adulthood can help you get a better job and achieve better quality of life. *"When I came here, I didn't expect to be taking classes all the time. But I've come to see that they help me, that they're useful to me. If I hadn't been learning, I would still be cleaning apartments and barely speak English. Today I am planning my own business, I am qualified, I won't get lost anymore."*

Adam's case

Basic data about the respondent

Male, 52 years old, has lived in England for 16 years, received his primary education in Slovakia. He took several courses in England.

History of relocation

Adam belongs to a smaller group of respondents who moved to England without an "invitation", i.e. without the help of relatives or other social networks. *"I came here for a better life and job.... When I arrived, I went to the job centre, which is similar to labour office. They offer you an English course and find you a job."*

Job opportunities in Slovakia and England

He left Slovakia unemployed. *"I had a problem finding a job in Slovakia. We moved from the city to the countryside and I couldn't get a job there. For a while I worked in the Czech Republic, in a factory, but it wasn't good, I had to stay in a hostel."*

He worked in low-paid jobs in England until he learned the language well. I appreciates the services of the job centre. *"In the beginning, I only had an on-call job. When they needed or missed someone. That was not good, we didn't have enough money. Later I was offered a job as a cleaner at the job centre. But I had already been going to school for two years and learning English." And the job centre will find you a job, even a good job. But just mustn't refuse it."* The respondent explains the importance of at least a basic knowledge of the language. *"It's much harder without language. If you want to find a good job, you need to speak English. Here, even older Roma people who have not been in school for 30 years sign up for courses and go to school if they want to have a good life."*

The respondent has been working as a cleaner in a primary school for 10 years. *"I have a well-paid job, a great team."*

Thoughts about education

Like other respondents, he thinks of education in the context of a link to the labour market or a better job. *Here, if you have some work experience and qualifications, you have a great chance. Without that, the chances are slim. And it is definitely necessary to speak English".*

Discussion and conclusion

Reflection of education

Roma people see their education in England as:

- a necessity in relation to any job, even a low-paid one *("it's hard to find a job here without an English course")*

- a benefit that brings a real chance of a better job (especially a better paid one), a satisfying working career, success and fulfilling the main goal of moving abroad, which is to improve the quality of life *("So, whoever wants to be successful, it is better if he has some education. For example, I was offered to do a forklift course by my employer. When I took the course, I could move up to a better place and, more importantly, it paid better.")*
- an investment that pays off
- capital to be used in the future, e.g. when changing careers *("Thanks to the fact that I studied in England and am still willing to learn, I have no problem getting a job and I am not afraid of the future."*).

Respondents spoke spontaneously about their own education, considering it part of their life story in England. To varying degrees, but most of them reached for the opportunity to receive some education, at least in the basics of the English language. Women, who are particularly vulnerable in the education system and in the labour market (e.g. Kováčová, 2020), also reported on their educational experiences. All respondents (regardless of their education in England) were positive about the opportunity to learn a language, gain a qualification or acquire specific skills (e.g. including computer skills). Education is useful. *"And when a person wants to advance to a good place, he or she has the opportunity to do some courses. I did* in England were choosing their education based on a specific job offer (either directly from an employer or from the job centre, but linked to a specific job). The education they received after arriving in the country was "for better employment", such as language courses or courses in IT skills.

Education in England is affordable, but not for everyone. *"It also depends on who catches on... ...how you lived in Slovakia... Because they have not received any basics at home, they don't even have a basic education, and they cannot even read and write properly..... They don't learn English, they don't take courses.* The respondent explains that Roma people who lack basic academic skills (reading, writing) have problems with employment also in England. A more complex assessment is offered by a worker at the local community centre, who provides accompaniment and counselling (including job counselling) to the arriving Roma people. *"In principle, it is easier to find work here than in Slovakia. But I know a lot of people who still can't find a job. Most of them are illiterate, unable to read or write. And they definitely have problem finding a job.* Low self-esteem, fear of unfamiliar environments in which they cannot find their way and the inability to acquire at least a basic knowledge of the English language make their employment significantly more difficult. The community worker is also sceptical about the future of Roma in England because of Brexit. *"After Brexit, the conditions are much stricter, plus there is more red tape."* A 2016 study on the quality of life, inclusion of Roma migrants in England is also critical (Morris, 2016), the author records a deterioration in the relationship of the native population to Roma people after Brexit, insecure jobs in unregulated economic sectors (e.g. temporary jobs), poor working conditions and poor quality but expensive rental housing.

Compared to the positive assessment of Roma migrant workers from England, reports on Roma adult education in Slovakia are more sceptical. In 2012, the UNDP research team published a report on the evaluation of European funds' investments in Roma inclusion in Slovakia, among the investments monitored was the training of the low-skilled unemployed, which the researchers evaluated critically, mainly due to its poor effectiveness. They also report not very positive evaluations from participants (Hurrle et al. 2012, p. 76). Also, Lukáč in his 2015 monograph presented findings from his research on the topic of Roma adult education. The field research was carried out in the context of the so-called secondary education, i.e. education offered by schools to adults who have not completed primary education or have no qualifications. There are not many such programmes in Slovakia, they are mainly attended by Roma people. The understanding of adult education as a "ticket" to the labour market also appears in his findings. The "paper" or certificate of completion is considered as the main benefit and reason for attending training by respondents. However, unlike migrants in England, they have

no specific plans to use it, they assume it will be useful to them in their search for work.

The size and structure of the labour market in the two countries is very different, but respondents in England compare their employability with Slovakia to the detriment of their home country, not only because of the number of job opportunities, but also in terms of employers' attitudes towards Roma people. Many people appreciate that in England, unlike in Slovakia, no one looks at their ethnicity, they are not disadvantaged on the labour market because of it. The disadvantage of Roma jobseekers in Slovakia is a well-known fact, confirmed by research (e.g. Employment Institute, 2019).

Respondents reflected on children's education on two levels. Firstly, as an obligation that is strictly controlled and sanctioned *("everyone is careful here, when a child doesn't come to school, they call and then there are problems"*). Irregular schooling is common in the early years of life in England (families take different lengths of time to adapt to new conditions), or for children from families who migrate frequently between countries. Low rates of educational non-participation may be a consequence of discrimination against Roma people in education systems in their home countries (Penfold, 2015). In Slovakia, irregular school attendance of Roma pupils is a significant problem (e.g. FRA, 2014; Salner et al., 2004).

In the second line, migrants thought of a good education for their children as an investment that would pay off in the future. Drawing on their own experience, they plan formal education for their children: *"...and we wanted our children to have a better life..."*.

Respondents at educational institutions and teachers in England (whether for children or adults) valued being treated without prejudice. They feel accepted, they stressed that the conditions and rules in schools are the same for everyone, teachers care as much about their children's educational outcomes as they do about the outcomes of other pupils. They criticised Slovak education, especially because of the ethnic disadvantage of children. Similar findings are presented, for example, in a study by Sime - Fassett (2014), in which Roma who have relocated from Slovakia and Romania and live in Glasgow report bad experiences, ethnic segregation, teachers' disinterest and low expectations of Roma pupils (which is seen as one of the manifestations of exclusion).

The inclusion of Roma people in the education system is a challenge for several European countries. This is evidenced by the EU's coherent policies to support the education of the Roma population in Europe. The Slovak Republic has not been very successful in meeting the goals in this area. Also in our research, several respondents reported bad experiences with the Slovak school system. It was mentioned in several interviews that one of the reasons for moving abroad was to provide better opportunities for children. Criticism of Slovak schools as incapable of accepting and effectively educating Roma pupils can be heard from professional circles and from Roma people themselves.

a course recently to qualify as a security guard. It is a prerequisite for the performance of such activity. And I should make more money than I do now in the warehouse." The majority of respondents ***Education and children***

What supports Roma adult education in England

- Availability of opportunities: educational opportunities, but especially labour market opportunities *"But I also know people who have already studied at university here and are now managing a section in large companies. It's more about opportunities and possibilities and setting up how one can take advantage of them."*
- Equal opportunities, acceptance and equal treatment: "*My experience is that in Britain they look at the Roma as people, everybody helps. At home I have experienced racism everywhere, whether in the hospital or when looking for a job." "In England, skin colour is not taken into account. It's not like in Slovakia." "Those Roma people who have learned the language a little better have no problem finding work and even choose where they want to work." "The Slovak labour offices treat Roma people racially, they don't differentiate between them, they lump them all together.*

I haven't had that experience in England. Neither did anyone I know."

- Availability of information on education and its benefits. The role of career guidance is also highlighted by other authors who have examined the educational conditions of adults from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. Bowl, 2001; Pirohová, Lukáč, Lukáčová, 2019)
- Support and motivation of a close person or authority figure: e.g. supervisor at work, Roma activists, community centre worker. *"An awful lot of people have helped me. I had no way of knowing that I could do courses..." "A supervisor at work offered me a course.... "He* (the company manager) *noticed that I was smart..."*

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