

THE EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF THE POOR CHILDREN IN THE REPUBLIC MACEDONIA

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UDK: 316.344.2-058.34:37(497.7)

Abstract

The poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon which has been caused by certain living conditions which imply limited opportunities to participate in the social life.

This work looks into a specific aspect of the poverty - the aspirations of the poor children towards the education.

Due to the numerous definitions we shall operationalize the term *child poverty* for the needs of this work. Children living in poor families are considered to be poor. They have experienced a lack of material, spiritual or emotional resources necessary for survival, development and progress. Due to the lack thereof, they cannot enjoy their rights, fulfill their potentials in order to be equal community members. There are worrisome data that the percentage of children living in poverty is higher than that the percentage of adults living in poverty.

Most of the children growing in poor families remain trapped in the inter-generation cycle of poverty and in social exclusion. This is the reason for the lack of activities in the direction of developing the knowledge of the poor children, practicing the moral values and knowledge which are required in all areas of life. The children learn how to live their lives in the society or the group they belong to through the process of socialization, which is enabled by education and upbringing.

The goal of this work is to detect the presence/absence of the poor children aspirations towards gaining knowledge, moral values and skills. Special attention shall be given to the aspirations of the children from the poorest Romany families towards gaining knowledge, moral values and skills. The goal of the work is to offer mechanisms for decreasing the number of poor children by stimulating their involvement in the educational process.

Key words: *poor children, educational aspirations, mechanisms for involvement in the educational process.*

Introduction

A lot of research has emphasized the relation between the economic situation of the family and the exclusion from/inclusion in the social life of the members of these families. The bad material condition of the families stipulates formation of various social groups. One highly specific social group consists of the children from poor families. This group is the subject of interest in this work. The children growing in poor families mostly lack material, spiritual and emotional resources that are necessary for survival, development and progress. The children should be physically healthy, mentally conscious, emotionally safe, socially capable and prepared to study. These children cannot enjoy their rights to entirely fulfill their potential and become equal members in the society. The findings that most of the poor children are forgotten in an inter-generation cycle of poverty and social exclusion are worrisome. There are numerous

reasons; however, the low educational level, the lack of motivation among the members of the poor families for acquiring moral values by studying are significant prerequisites for the inter-generation cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

The education is a foundation stone for each individual. The process commences early in the family, then in the preschool institutions and the elementary schools. The quality of the child development largely depends on the activities undertaken by the adults for the children. In the upbringing process, the parents' role is vital. It is necessary for them to create, value and cultivate the various needs and interests of the children which would help them to smoothly include themselves in the social life. Namely, the nature and circumstances of a child's upbringing significantly influence their position in the groups they belong to as well as in the society.

We do not wish to dispute the scientific assumptions of the connection between the economic welfare and the poverty, or that of the education and the poverty. Our interest is aimed towards the analysis of a specific social group, i.e. the poor children in the Republic of Macedonia. The focus is aimed at the aspirations of the poorest Romany children towards education. This work searches for answers to the following questions: "Have the poorest children developed a social identity, and what is it like? Does that social identity include moral judgments which favor the education? Do the poorest Romany children justify or not the exclusion from the educational institutions? What are the most common activities of the parents with their children and what are their attitudes in relation to their education and that of their children?"

Guided by the theoretical findings that the risk of poverty is higher among the uneducated people, the goal of this work is to offer mechanisms for reducing the number of poor children by stimulating them to get included in the educational process. Data of the State Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia as well as data and findings from other scientific research have been used for accomplishing the set goals. Within this research, the author has also used data from the qualitative analysis on the life quality of 420 poor families having children. (Dimitrievska, 2008:51)

Data from the qualitative research, which was conducted among the 60 poorest Romany families, have been used for analyzing the educational aspirations. The research included 50 children at the ages between 4-14. A quota sampling was used. Fifteen children were selected from two improvised camps (collectors of plastic containers) located near the center of the capital city of the Republic of Macedonia. The remaining children are from a Romany suburb in Skopje (Zlokukjani).

A semi-structured open interview was used. Due to the specifics of the researched population (minor children) informal conversations with the parents were conducted. For the purpose of completing the data in relation to the socializing of the researched individuals, a simple observation was applied. The children were observed in the places they live in. For the needs of this research, the case study method was applied.

1. Child poverty

Today when we have a great economic progress, highly advanced information technology, numerous children more actively experience all forms of poverty. There are many reasons why a child is deprived of material, spiritual and emotional resources, why children have limited access to the basic services, why they cannot enjoy their rights. Such reasons are not

topic of interest in this work, there is a single reason for all the children. It is the resources of the family where the child grows and develops. The proper child development is inseparably connected to the definition and allocation of the resources in the family. (Baldak et al. 2014:85) According to the statement of the Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Babatunde Osotimehin, today more than 500 million children in the world live in poverty. The number of children living in severe poverty in Macedonia is higher than 150.000. (Damchevska, V. 2016, 13/14 August:2) According to the data of the State Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia, the number of poor children constantly increases. In 2011, 36.8% of the children aged between 0 and 17 lived under the poverty line.

The incomes/expenditures of these children are 12.2% beneath the poverty line. (The lines of poverty, 11.07.2012) This total deficit (of 12.2%) of all poor children demonstrates how many resources are required for the poor children so it could be equal to the line of poverty. The data indicate that under the poverty line most of the children are aged between 7 and 14. Such condition is somewhat understandable. Namely, according to the official data in 2011, 30.4% of the Macedonians lived beneath the poverty line. Analyzed by profiles, the most vulnerable groups of the population are the ones having more children, families where the parents have no education or very low level of education. The poor families having children between the ages of 7 and 14 have additional needs. It is an age group when the children need to go to school. Having into consideration the poverty profile in the country, it is completely understandable that the increased expenditures in the family cause problems. Exactly there one of the reasons was detected as to why most of these children do not go to school and remain trapped in the inter-generation cycle of poverty.

The analysis of the statistical data of the State Statistical Office points to another significant moment linked to the educational aspirations of the poor children. Namely, the poor families having more children are the riskiest category in the profile of child poverty. What should be indicated is the continuous and frequent presence of this profile of child poverty in the entire period since the State Statistical Office has started measuring the child poverty. (The lines of poverty: 13.09.2010 and 11.07.2012) The results point to the following conclusions: the bad economic condition in our country conditions differentiation of a specific social group - a group of poor children. The number of members in this group constantly increases with each passing year. The riskiest profile of child poverty are the children who need to go to school (aged between 7 and 14) and children who live in families having three or more children.

2. Educational aspirations and poverty

The term education regardless if it refers to formal/institutionalized or informal is rather complex. There are polemics in the scientific literature on this topic. (Georgievski, 1999:57) Without going into polemics, the definition of Kokovic is accepted wherein the education is defined as “activity whose goal is to develop knowledge, moral values and understanding which are required in all areas of live”. (Kokovic, 1995:57)

The data of the State Statistical Office indicate to connection between the degree of education and the condition of poverty (See: Relative poverty according to the education of the head of the household, State Statistical Office, announcement 13.09.2010, number 4.1.10.64 and 11.07.2012, number 4.1.12.50). The data of the qualitative analysis on the condition of poverty with 420 poor families indicate to a significantly similar tendency. (Dimitrievska, 2008:51)

There are noticeable differences between the attitudes of the poor families members regarding the educational need. The attitudes of the parents without education are mostly negative. There is no difference in the attitudes of the parents in households where the head thereof does not have elementary education or has only elementary education. The parents attitudes towards their own education and that of their children are determined by the type of family they belong to, the length of time spent in poverty, the cultural relation towards education, their educational degree and their age (Donevska, Dimitrievska, Novkovska 2011:113).

The attitudes of the children are mostly conditioned by the inferior social and economic status of their family, lack of opportunities in such inferior position to form an attitude on the necessity for education at all as well as to form an attitude that the education is an important factor for breaking free from poverty. The children attitudes are also conditioned by their parents attitudes as well as by the lack of wider and more efficient social action for overcoming the unfavorable condition in their families.

3. The research results on the educational aspirations of the poor Romany children

Guided by the research goals for detecting the educational aspirations of the poor Romany children, a qualitative approach of research was used. This research orientation would enable us to systematically gather data on the educational aspirations of the poor Romany children, directly from the children and their parents. Using logic in the practical acting, speaking the language of “cases and contexts”, researching their living conditions in detail and authentically, the way they handle their lives, will enable us to obtain a better understanding of their educational aspirations.

The text below shortly describes 3 cases. One point of view of a child who lives in a Romany neighborhood. The second story is of a child who lives in the same neighborhood but in much worse conditions. The third case is about the children who live in improvised camps.

Case 1 - Senad finished fifth grade in elementary school. He studies in a mixed school (Macedonians and Romanies). He has a younger sister who goes to an ethnically mixed kindergarten. His mother does not have a permanent job. Sometimes she cleans houses. She has not finished elementary school, she is literate and can read the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets well. His father is a carpenter and has finished high school. Sometimes he works at home, sometimes in some private company. They live in their own house, sharing the yard with the father's brothers who have separate houses. The family has lived there all of their lives. The house is clean and they have the necessary living conditions. Senad is an A student. He wants to study. He is satisfied with the relations of the teachers. He often says that his teacher loves him and always helps him. When he grows up, he wants to become a football player. But he also wants to get a bachelor's degree. He is very communicative. He can read well, mathematics is his favorite subject. He loves reading books. His uncle, who has a degree in literature, often gives him books. He socializes with the children from the neighborhood. He visits his classmates when his father can drive him there. When he has a problem with the school work, he asks help from his father and uncle, who has a university diploma. He says, sometimes his mother does not know how to properly help him. His sister spends more time with his mother and he with his father. This child senses the difference between the rich and poor children. He says that some of the rich children are spoiled, sassy, evil, bad and two-faced. It is interesting that when describing his own poverty situation this child, who lives in a poor family, does not mention the basic physiological needs

which are essential for keeping us alive (Kilen, Ratlend, 2014:86). He talks about a new form of needs (technical needs). He experiences the poverty as an inability to have a good cell phone, tablet, fast internet connection, many games, to go on holiday. He is satisfied with his health. He is satisfied with himself. It is interesting that this child shows great care for the family. He is very protective of his sister. He is not satisfied with the conditions of the neighborhood he lives in. He often compares it with the one of the friends he visits for play.

Case 2 - Orhan is 11 years old, he comes from a very poor Romany family. He lives in the same neighborhood and goes to the same school as Senad. These children, although separated by only one street, do not communicate. Orhan lives in an improvised house with one room and shares it with three brothers and two sisters. He is the only one who goes to school. Considering the age of their siblings, they should all go to school. He is in the fifth grade. He recognizes the letters but cannot read fluently. He says the teacher helps him with the school work. Although his parents are young (25 years as they say), they cannot help him because are illiterate. He socializes only with his siblings and cousins who do not attend school. Orhan wants to go to school. He sees himself as different than the other children he goes to school with. He describes his difference with the following words: "I cannot wear clean and nice clothes to school. I do not have other clothes. My shoes are torn. Only my bag is pretty this year. My mother found the bag in a garbage bin, it is new. I have no money for snack. I cannot buy notebooks." When he grows up, Orhan wants to be a doctor. However, this child does not think that if he is an excellent student, if he reads a lot, regularly performs the tasks given by the teacher, that he will become a doctor. He wants to be a doctor because his best friend (his cousin) who is at the same age and is deaf and unable to speak. He wants to help him. This child is communicative, cheerful, smiley, charismatic and mostly satisfied with life. He wants to help his parents so often he gathers plastic containers with them. Sometimes he wants to light a cigarette. He is not satisfied with not having money. His parents think that Orhan should go to school. His father says that he has no money for the other children to buy them pencils, books, clothes. He needs a lot of money for the five of them. He thinks they should help him. Orhan will teach them to read. The mother's attitude is even stranger, she thinks that the oldest child (the daughter) should not go to school. She says that she teaches the daughter to cook, to help her. She has heard that girls get reaped. She is afraid to let her to school. Even if they had the money, she would not let the girls to school. They can study at home. Orhan teaches them to read. This child defines the poverty as inability to satisfy his needs for food and clothes. His parents understand the education as an activity aimed at learning numbers and letters. Orhan often mentions and admires one of his cousins, Senad. Orhan says, "he helps us more than anyone else, he works all day long. When he comes home, he buys us juice, flips, cookies. He is a very good friend. He knows a lot. He learned the numbers and letters by himself." Senad is 10 or 12 years old, he is not sure. Sometimes he lives with his mother and sometimes with his brother who is married. He has never been to school but has a significant street work experience. Senad works whatever he can, as he says, "I mostly sell different things, wash cars, beg sometimes, gather things from garbage bins, mostly bottles and paper. One man comes to our neighborhood with a tractor and gives us 100 denars for a bag full of plastic bottles. I go out every day and gather plastic bottles from the garbage bins. Sometimes I am lucky and fill my bag in two days, sometimes not. It gets dark when I go home." Senad socializes only with the children who beggar with him. He has never been to school. He thinks that the teachers do not like poor children. He says "the teachers give a lot of homework to the poor children. They often give them homework the children cannot do and then they scold

them”. He does not trust the people who are not like him. He wants to be the boss in the group. He has a criminal records.

Case 3 - On the right side of the Vardar river, near the center of the city and the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, right across the newly built City Beach (“Gradska Plazha”) around 20 children aged between 0 and 15 live in approximately 10 tents made of nylon and cardboard. Some of the “children” aged 16 and 17 are already parents. There is no water or electricity in the camp. They look happy, although they are dirty and barefoot. These children almost every day go with their parents, mostly with the mothers, to collect plastic containers from the garbage bins. Sometimes they can be seen inside the bins. These children cannot evaluate their life quality because to every question we asked they just laughed and answered positively. However, almost all of them had a negative attitude regarding the school. They say they feel the happiest when they are at home (they refer to the camp). Actually, their attitude is confirmed by their readiness to immediately start singing, dancing and get involved in various child games only with the children in the camp. Their parents are mostly illiterate. When we talked with them about their children going to school, we received very interesting answers. The parents think that they should go to school, but the state does not care about them. In their opinion, it is the politicians fault because they visit them only prior to elections. They mostly say: “We are poor. We don’t have any money. There is no school nearby. There is one in Shutka, but how to get there? It is too far to go on foot. That is why they do not go to school”. It is interesting that the parents do not feel any guilt that their children do not go to school. However, they positively evaluate the children participation in gathering plastic containers. Most of the parents say, “The children help us. If we gather more bottles, there will be more money for them as well. What will they do home, they will just fight each other”. The findings are similar for the other analyzed camp.

The findings from the stories point to the following generalizations in relation to the educational aspirations of the poor Romany children. According to our research, we can talk about three profiles of poor Romany children: old settled poor Romany, newly settled families that live in the same neighborhood with the old settled families and families that live in improvised camps. The children attitudes towards the education are determined by the type of family they belong to. The parents’ degree of education affects their attitudes on education, but also the attitudes of the children thereto. The parents attitudes towards their own education and that of their children are basically positive with most of the old settlers of Romany families. The attitudes of the parents from the newly settled Romany families are mostly negative. There is a strong sense of exclusion due to their condition of poverty. They value the education only as need to learn the letters and the numbers. The attitudes of the parents who live in the improvised camps are contradictory. They think the children should go to school, but in their opinion the culpability for the children not going to school is with the politicians. These parents also reduce the education to the need for learning the letters and numbers. The children attitudes towards the education can be defined as lack of developed awareness for this need among most of them, especially with those living in improvised camps. In the children attitudes towards education numerous justifications dominate for the exclusion from the educational process, especially with the girls, which come down to prejudice and rigid stereotypes.

Final conclusions and recommendations

The stated findings concerning the researched problem “The educational aspirations of the poor children in the Republic of Macedonia” demonstrated that most of the poor Romany children develop social identity mostly without including moral judgments, thereby justifying the exclusion within contexts that reflect prejudice, discrimination and bias. There is a developed mistrust at a very early age (aged 2-3) especially with the children living in improvised camps and those from the newly settled families with regards to the others which are different. Such developed identity is mostly an obstacle for building a positive relation to the education. Most of the poorest Romany children, due to the inferior social and economic status of their families and low educational level of their parents, cannot form an attitude for the general need of educational as well that the education is an important factor for escaping poverty. The low educational level of their parents has a strong negative influence on the children attitudes regarding education. In the joint activities of the parents and the children usually there is a lack of activities for developing knowledge, moral values and beliefs required in all areas of life. Their joint activities come down to gathering plastic containers or preparing food, cleaning and similar activities (this refers to the girls). Most of the children from this social group do not have an equal access to education, especially to the modern technology.

The constant increase of the number of poor children in the country presents a long-term problem and risk for every country. We consider that the preventive action on the social risks would reduce the damage suffered by the state in the future. For the purpose of reducing the number of poor children in the country, guided by the scientific findings, individual programs for working with the poorest children should be prepared. Individual programs should be prepared for working with their parents as well, especially due to the cultural differences of the Romany children.

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