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I fight, therefore I am: Success factors of Roma university students from Serbia

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In spite of the improvements in the inclusive policies and practices, Roma students are still underrepresented in higher education (HE) in Serbia. The main aim of this study is to ascertain contextual and personal factors of the success of Roma university students. Study participants were Roma studying at four public universities in Serbia who filled in a questionnaire on their family– and school-related experience, and participated in interviews on their educational trajectories, as well as in a two-day workshop dedicated to empowering students through reflecting upon their educational trajectories and personal strengths. Qualitative thematic analysis was applied on one open-ended question on life mottos from 89 questionnaires, 20 interviews and their products and elaborations of 16 workshop participants. It showed that psychological and instructional support from parents and teachers, in some cases – peers and Roma NGOs, together with scholarships and affirmative measures by enrolment, were important success factors. Students' life mottos predominantly contained the themes of fight and persistence. Most personal strengths were related to proactivity and optimism. This points to a highly developed psychological capital of Roma university students. Besides continuous financial support, participants stressed that the provision of continuous psychosocial support, informal learning opportunities and opportunities for peer mentorship and networking would result in a higher number of Roma students in HE.

Keywords: Roma students, higher education (HE), social capital, psychological capital, Serbia

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Introduction

According to the Council of Europe estimations (which are higher than the official census data), between 700,000 and 1,360,000 Roma live in the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2014). Roma are one of the most marginalized and deprived groups, with limited access to education, health, social protection, and the labour market in most countries (Robayo-Abril & Millan, 2019). Given that lower quality education is at the same time a product of social exclusion and an introduction to a new cycle of social exclusion, since it reduces employment opportunities after graduation, the recommendations of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union for the educational inclusion of Roma are based on the social and economic importance of education (Council of EU, 2013). The importance of education was also recognised by the Roma Decade (2005–2015) since the largest number of initiatives and national strategies within it were focused on education.

Although education is the priority area in which the most progress has been made (Rorke, 2015), there are still many challenges that impede inclusion in schools – segregation and ghettoized schools still exist, the policies still use non-inclusive terminology and do not address antigypsyism in an appropriate manner. Also, there is a lack of cooperation with Roma organizations and the Roma who are actively involved in the protection of their rights (Kirova & Thorlakson, 2015; Lajčakova et al., 2020). Research conducted in eleven European Union countries (FRA, 2014) and the Western Balkans (Robayo-Abril & Millan, 2019) indicates that the most common problems faced by Roma in education include the following: low coverage of Roma children with pre-school education, increased risk of segregated schooling accompanied by prejudice and discrimination, as well as high dropouts during secondary education. Research shows that, in many countries, inequality in education begins during early childhood and that the education gap widens at higher education (HE) levels. This reflects the need for more evidence-based recommendations and actions, i.e. more studies on the factors affecting the academic success of Roma students.

Education of Roma students in Serbia

According to the latest Census, 147,604 (2.05%) people declared themselves as Roma; however, the unofficial data from several other sources show that around 600,000 Roma actually live in Serbia (European Commission, 2014). The Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia from 2016 to 2025 provides a precise description of the position of Roma and provides insight into the challenges that Roma continue to face in various social spheres directly related to their unfavourable socio-

economic position. The biggest problems of Roma in Serbia are poverty, social exclusion, racism, explicit and implicit discrimination, especially in the field of employment, education and housing (Cvejić, 2020; Sicurella, 2016).

In the context of education, the Law on the Fundamentals of Education System from 2009 introduced changes in educational practice that facilitate the availability of education and promote high quality education for all children (not only for children from different vulnerable groups). During the Roma Decade, Serbia developed recommendations for educational inclusion of all children, including promoting the early education, understanding education as a driver of social inclusion and developing institutional mechanisms to prevent discrimination (Jovanović et al., 2013).

Although existing policies do support diversity and inclusion in general and widening of Roma participation in HE, they seem to represent a form of policy compliance as a strategy towards faster accession to EU (Jovanović, 2018), and do not lead to substantial changes in practice. Roma students are still underrepresented at all levels of education. A total of 99% of the general population aged 6–13 is covered by mandatory primary education, while the percentage of Roma children aged 6–13 enrolled in primary school is 92% (SORS & UNICEF, 2020). While the coverage of the general population by secondary education, which is not mandatory, stands at 94%, the share of Roma students (more boys than girls) attending secondary school stands at 28% (SORS & UNICEF, 2020). The number of youths enrolling in HE institutions has been increasing over the past years, but the number of Roma attending college is still negligible. The coverage of the general population by tertiary education stands at 42%, whereas the number of Roma youths attending college is under 1% (Bojadijeva, 2015).

Wider social factors that hamper the education of Roma students are stereotypes and prejudices that exist in the society towards the Roma population, expectations that the stakeholders have in relation to Roma children and parents regarding their abilities and motivation for schooling. There are numerous studies that show the extent to which the values and beliefs of teachers (and also future teachers), as well as institutional racism, affect the quality of education and opportunities that will be provided to youth from vulnerable groups (Jovanović, 2018; Peček, et al., 2014; Namrata, 2011; Petrović et al., 2010). Prejudices serve to justify different discriminatory practices (explicit and implicit) in the society (and education as one of its parts), which produce inequality and support established relations of power and domination (Bhabha et al., 2017; Tomanović & Stanojević, 2015). This can lead to lower educational aspirations (Simić et al., 2021) and experiencing studying at the HE institutions stressful (Tomanović & Stanojević, 2015).

Significant obstacles for continuing education at colleges include limited access to information, the lack of social support, the lack of adequate role

models, as well as the model of ethnic socialization (Hughes et al., 2009; Jovanović, 2018) that deepens the gap and mistrust between Roma and the general population.

Present study

Although the obstacles for Roma students to continue their education beyond compulsory primary school have largely been explored, there were few studies focusing on academic success factors. In the international literature, one can find out about the factors that contribute to academic success of children from vulnerable and marginalized groups. On the individual level, these factors are optimism, dominance of instrumental coping strategies, good emotional regulation, proactive attitude and self-confidence, as well as hope (Burton & Dowling, 2005; Snyder et al., 2002; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008. On the family level, the factors that stand out, in addition to the socioeconomic and educational status of the family, are the quality of parental relationships and social support of important people in the environment, as well as the promotion of independent decision-making by parents (Masten & Reed, 2002; Soenens et al., 2007). Research also points to a link between ethnic socialization and academic success. Cultural socialization and the adoption of a positive image of the group to which they belong, conditions a positive identity and high self-esteem, which leads to greater confidence in their competencies (academic) and academic success (Hughes et al., 2009; Murry et al., 2009), and also to resilience – the capacity to overcome different obstacles and to recover from adversities (Spencer, 1983). On the local community level, existence of adequate role models, as well as the values that are nurtured in the community, related to respect for diversity and interculturalism, proved to be significant factors (Benner & Graham, 2013).

However, there were few academic studies that specifically addressed the factors that contribute towards the Roma students' academic success in HE (see e.g., Jovanović, 2018). Therefore, we are interested in exploring Roma university students' personal stories about their educational trajectories, with the special focus on determining the factors that are related to academic success. The goal of this study is to identify the contextual and personal success factors of Roma university students. Therefore, our research questions include the following:

1. What are the family-related factors of academic success of Roma university students?
2. What are the school-, community– and system-factors of academic success of Roma university students?
3. What are the personal factors of academic success of Roma university students?

Although not in our focus, when talking about success factors, some respondents spontaneously mentioned challenging factors, as well as some kinds of support they did not have, but wished they had. In addition to the identification of success factors, this encouraged us to offer recommendations for the improvement of practices related to Roma students in Serbia.

Methodological background

This study was a part of a larger mixed-method research conducted within the project "Roma champions", realized in partnership between the Centre for Interactive Pedagogy and François-Xavier Bagnoud Centre for Health and Human Rights (FXB Centre). The research in question was organized in three phases: 1) administering questionnaires to Roma HE students, 2) conducting in-depth interviews with a sample of Roma HE students, and 3) conducting one workshop with a sample of Roma HE students. In this paper, we focus only on qualitative data collected through all three phases of the Project with Roma HE students.

Research participants and instruments

Participants in this research were 89 Roma students from four Serbian state universities (56% female) – Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and Kragujevac. They were mostly students of social sciences and humanities (51%), with almost one half of them (47%) enrolled in the first or the second study year. They were approached with the help of Roma student organizations and Roma NGOs. After obtaining a signed informed consent, they filled out the questionnaire that involved several scales and questions assessing the personal, family-, school-, and community-related factors that might have been related to academic success. The questionnaires were administered by young researchers, Roma studying social sciences, who had themselves grown up in the places where the research was conducted. Although they had already had basic knowledge of scientific research methodology, the main research team organized two-day training on data collection through questionnaires and the process of data entry in the database to strengthen their capacities for fieldwork. The researcher was present when the respondents were completing the questionnaires in order to clarify certain issues in case they had any dilemmas or questions, but the respondents completed the paper-and-pencil questionnaires on their own.

A group of 20 participants from the original group of 89 was selected for further Project and research activities in the following manner: the researchers called up every fifth questionnaire respondent on the list, or the next one if the fifth declined to take part in this stage of the research. Five Roma

students from each University centre (12 female) participated in one-hour interviews conducted by their peers – the same persons who administered the questionnaires. Beforehand, these four students received one-day training on interviewing process and skills. Interview guides included the following question sections: life journey, family, community, educational journey (the contexts of primary school, secondary school and college) and plans for the future. Interviews were transcribed for further analyses.

Finally, the same group of 20 students were invited to a two-day workshop Writing Lives, whose goal, besides collecting additional data, was to connect students, empower them to create small support communities and take over leadership roles in their local communities. It was based on the work of Bhabha and associates (2017) and has similarities with the work of Daiute and Kovač Cerović (2017), but was adjusted to this project's context and goals. Sixteen students (8 females) joined the workshop and participated in several participatory techniques (drawing educational trajectories, writing letters and messages from the perspective of significant others, modelling personal strengths, creating chapters of a book about university experiences and creating short slogans targeting different stakeholders). The workshop was facilitated by one member of the main research team, audio-recorded and then transcribed for the sake of data analysis.

Data analysis

In this study, data were elicited from three sources: a) questionnaires, b) interviews and c) workshop. Answers to one open-ended question from the questionnaire on students' life mottos were analysed, because we believed these mottos could point to the values and beliefs that represented students' personal drivers of success. Out of 89 students who filled in the questionnaire, 46 provided answers to this open-ended question. We also analysed the narratives from 20 interviews, in particular those parts that referred to the educational journey – experiences with teachers and peers from the primary and secondary school and from the university, personal strengths and external support that contributed to their academic success. Finally, we analysed the narratives and the products from the workshop in which 16 students participated – students' clay representations of personal strengths and accompanying explanations, the messages students reported they had been receiving from others, the messages they would like to convey to others, as well as elaborations of educational trajectories. Students' readiness to openly share personal stories varied, so it was not possible to reliably notify the frequencies of certain themes; therefore, narratives from the workshop only served to illustrate some, more elaborated and robust findings from the interviews and questionnaires.

When narrating about their successes in both the interviews and the workshop, students tended to spontaneously mention the challenges and support they lacked, which we decided to include in our analysis. Although not comprehensively explored, we believed these data enabled us to define recommendations for educational policy and practice improvement.

We inductively searched for the recurring themes in students' narratives and products – for personal, family, school and community success factors – but we coded the challenges as well, since they spontaneously emerged in the participants' narratives. One author of this paper coded data from the questionnaires and interviews in the first phase, while the other coded data from the workshop. In the second phase, after approximately one third of materials had been analysed, the authors discussed the codes created for all three types of material and revised the coding scheme (the code names were slightly clarified, and some codes were merged). In the third phase, after all materials had been coded, we randomly selected approximately one quarter of coded segments from each data collection source and used them for determining the agreement between coders. There was a need for slight modification of the coding scheme for life mottos only, while intercoder reliability proved to be high (90% of segments were coded with the same code by two coders).

We did not connect the answers from single participants obtained through three different data collection techniques because our goal was not to investigate individual participants' narratives, but to find out about common themes at the level of the entire sample. Although this study was of limited scope, methodological triangulation (having three research instruments exploring the same topics and two researchers doing and fine-tuning analyses) contributed to its credibility (Denzin, 1978). Moreover, we ensured additional validation of data through member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000); namely, two Roma students who participated in this study provided their feedback on the conclusions and recommendations.

Results and Discussion

Contextual factors – Family-related factors

We learned about the students' family background – the challenges and success factors – mostly from the interviews. Out of 20 Roma college students, nine (45%) talked about their families in a positive tone. These nine students reported about education being promoted as valuable (mostly due to extrinsic reasons) and continuing education as unnegotiable (see Table 1).

Parents (in some cases – grandparents and close relatives) were mentioned as the most relevant source of educational (instructional) support in primary school (in 7, that is, 35% of interviews), and the most important sources of

psychosocial support at the university level (in 13, i.e. 65% of interviews). Financial security the parents instilled in their children was also perceived as one of the success factors (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Family success factors – codes, examples and frequencies

Code	Examples (from the interviews)	Frequency (interviews)
Valuing education	*It has never been questioned whether I will enrol into secondary school and continue my education.* (Female student of social sciences, Belgrade)	9
Educational support	*My mother spent a lot of her time with us in the first grades, she helped us with homework, so we have developed study habits from the start.* (Male student of technology, Kragujevac)	7
Psychological support	*My mother and my grandparents have always believed in me. When someone insulted me because I was Roma, they taught me how I should ignore such people and always work hard so I demonstrate my value.* (Female students of social sciences, Belgrade)	13
Financial support	*Parents have always been saying how we need to study diligently, and they will earn money for our education.* (Male student of medicine, Niš)	8

During the workshop it has been revealed that, out of all family members, mothers' support had the greatest impact on students' academic endeavours. As reported by Workshop participants, mothers were supporting resilience and a proactive attitude towards life, repeating messages like: *Never give up, this day will always end and a brighter one will always follow.* They encouraged their children's autonomy, independence and responsibility. Mothers offered unconditional support and care, as well as direct financial support (messages they conveyed to their children were: *Don't worry, I'll always be here for you as long as I live*; *We'll be together whatever happens*; *Don't worry about money. That's my problem*).

However, five interviewees (20%) reported dysfunctional family relationships, accompanied with loss of parent(s), parents' divorce, frequent relocations, bullying, discrimination from teachers, discrimination from immediate and wider environment etc. They described these relationships and events as being stressful and traumatic to them. They felt neglected, while some of them were forced to take over responsibilities around household and younger siblings from an early age on. Some were dissuaded by family members from continuing their education. In such an unsupportive and neglecting environment, they felt different and lonely.

Contextual factors – School-, community– and system-related factors

When talking about success factors outside family in the interviews, the majority of participants mentioned psychological support received from school staff (in 11 cases from teachers and in one case from the school expert associate), and instructional support received from teachers (see Table 2). Teachers' educational support in primary school was mentioned in six interviews (30%), while their educational support in secondary education was mentioned as relevant in 11 cases (55%). Another success factor related to school was the provision of financial support and necessary learning material and clothes through school-organized initiatives (see Table 2).

Workshops for Roma students organized by local Roma NGOs led by local Roma leaders appeared as a topic in two interviews (10%). Similarly, encouragement by university professors appeared only in one interview as a factor that helped a Roma student successfully adjust to the university environment. However, peer support appeared as relevant, especially in secondary schools, in the context of socialization and accepting oneself (elaborated in three interviews, i.e. 15%). Peer support in primary school and at college was mentioned only by one person (Table 2).

Students' narratives from the workshop confirmed the importance of teachers as role models (*I remembered a college teacher who had come from a poor family and made it*), who set high expectations, thus expressing trust in students' capacities. There were teachers who nurtured proactivity and persistence (messages like: *Don't give up now, you've just started, we haven't seen everything you can do*), showed respect for Roma identity and heritage and understanding for all the unprivileged (*She attached a lot of importance to the preservation of culture and tradition I carry in me, her message was never to be ashamed of my nation*).

When students mentioned peers as a source of support in the interviews and the workshop, it referred to helping them make contact with others, overcome their timidity and demureness in communication with other peers, helping them to reframe their priorities in life (messages like: *Enjoy life*!), encouraging them (*You've been through a lot and you managed to survive, you can cope with this, too)*, and advising them how to protect themselves from being hurt (messages like: *Don't expect too much from others*, *Don't think about them, they're not important*).

Finally, the most frequently mentioned type of support obtained during secondary school (mentioned in 11, i.e. 55% of the interviews) and university (9, i.e. 40%) were scholarships, received from the Ministry of Education, National Council of Roma, Municipality, NGOs or Roma Education Fund (Table 2). Financial support was particularly important for making the decision to enrol in college. Thirteen of the interviewees (65%) highlighted that wit-

hout financial support they would not be able to study, although sometimes even such scholarships were not enough to cover all the expenses involved in studying. Similarly, affirmative measures during enrolment in college were also very useful (mentioned in 11, i.e. 55% of the interviews in the context of college and in two interviews in the context of secondary school as well, see Table 2) because they were exempted from paying tuition fees. However, some participants pointed to the risk of affirmative measures leading to stigmatization of Roma and deepening of beliefs among teachers and peers that Roma students are, on the one hand, insufficiently capable and, on the other, privileged in society, as elaborated below:

> *I had problems with friends who were telling me that no one should enrol through affirmative measures, they rejected me because I was Roma.* (Male student of medicine, Niš)

Table 2.
School-, community– and system-related success factors – codes, examples and frequencies

Code	Examples (from the interviews)	Frequency (interviews)
Psychological support from school staff	*She was helping all Roma students because she believed we were not guilty for our position in the society*. (Male student of medicine, Niš)	12
	As opposed to the usual story, she always demanded and expected more of me than of others. She used to tell the other kids to follow my lead. (Female students of social sciences, Niš)	
Instructional support from schoolteachers	*Teachers encouraged me, they praised me when I did something well and explained to me patiently when I didn't understand something*. (Female student of social sciences, Kragujevac)	11
Material and financial support organized by school	*Several times, the school organized donation of learning material, so I always had nice pens, notebooks...* (Male student of social sciences, Novi Sad)	3
Psychological support from a college professor	*Only one professor showed interest in me in a positive sense, offered me support and encouraged me*. (Female student of social sciences, Belgrade)	1
Psychological support from peers	*The only person from my class who supported me was my friend Tamara, with whom I was inseparable for those four years, and she was the only one who supported me. She was the only one who taught me how to fight with my feelings and she always told me not to think about them, they were irrelevant. She didn't ask about details of my family, she didn't want to hurt me, but when she saw I had a problem, she always gave me positive energy*. (Female student of social sciences, Belgrade)	4

Code	Examples (from the interviews)	Frequency (interviews)
Local NGOs empowering workshops	*I remember I participated in a set of workshops where we learned about learning strategies, about discrimination and violence...* (Male student of social sciences, Novi Sad)	2
Scholarships	*Without the scholarship from the Ministry and the support of the school psychologist, I would not have entered the university. This is what was key in making the decision to continue my education.* (Female student of medicine, Niš)	19
Affirmative measures	*I enrolled in the first year, but I was self-financing, later I was transferred to state financing with the help of affirmative measures, so that made it a lot easier for me.* (Female student of social sciences, Kragujevac)	11

Despite many positive examples, our participants (14, i.e. 70% of interviewees) also reported being discriminated against from kindergarten to university because of their ethnic background. The stereotypes and explicit messages repeated by others mainly implied distrust in the intellectual abilities of Roma, attribution of poor hygiene habits, as well as socially inappropriate and deviant behaviours (for example, propensity to pickpocketing). Such messages, as well as the experience of discrimination, were more frequent in the period of primary school compared to other periods of life. However, in secondary school (not obligatory by Law in Serbia) and at college there were comments by peers and teachers reflecting their belief that Roma were privileged because of the affirmative measures and allegedly lower criteria applied to them. It is noticeable that our participants more often stated that they had experienced discrimination by teachers than by peers. Participants talked about frequent discrimination on almost daily basis from the people they met in their surrounding (*It was common that someone just say 'Hey, Gipsy, what are you looking for here?'*) but also from teachers (*e.g. When I told my teacher that I wanted to enrol into secondary school, she told me that I was not capable of achieving that and that I should better enrol into a three-year vocational school*) and peers (*We all sat in the back rows. There was discrimination by peers. They avoided us and called us derogatory names*).

Finally, students narrated about the support they would have appreciated, but had not received. They stressed that free motivational training, professional psychological support and career guidance, as well as language courses, would have helped them cope with stress and gain new skills and confidence they needed. However, the first and most important step is to promote the already existing types of support because, as stated by four participants in workshops (25%), many of them were not aware of all the support available (e.g., *I would tell them [policy makers] to talk more with Roma who graduated from high school, from some university, and to provide more information to Roma youth about measures, potential challenges and solutions.*).

Personal factors

The data on personal success factors were gathered from students' life mottos elaborated in the questionnaires and the beliefs shared through two workshop activities. Qualitative thematic analysis of 46 answers to an open-ended question in the questionnaire (some including two mottos) yielded six themes in total (see Table 3).

Table 3
Life mottos – codes, examples and frequencies

Code	Examples (from the questionnaires)	Frequency (questionnaires)
Fight and persistence	If you can't fly – run, if you can't run – walk, if you can't walk – crawl, but whatever you do, keep going!	21
	Whatever happens, you have to keep fighting, no matter the cost!	
Humility and benevolence	*One good thing drives another good thing.*	10
	Happiness is in the little things.	
	Love conquers all.	
Optimism and faith	*After the rain, there comes a rainbow.*	6
	God is good.	
Personal accountability and autonomy	The way you think is the way you live.	6
	I live my life and I do not allow others to decide my fate.	
Learning and reflecting	*Cogito, ergo sum.*	5
	Those who did not search for the meaning of life did not even live it.	
Mindfulness	*Live each day as if it were your last.*	2

The results show that the predominant driving force of our Roma students is persistence. Almost half of all life mottos reflected the value of fighting for higher goals, proactivity and persistence. Other important values are personal accountability and independence, accompanied with hope, optimism and benevolence. Participants also stressed the importance of mindfulness, reflection and comprehension of the world.

Finally, through one modelling activity (sculpting personal strengths using modelling clay) in the workshop, participants had a chance to reflect upon and present their personal strengths. All personal strengths were connected with the participants' inner capacity to be proactive and have a clear vision of important goals, together with the strength, energy and optimism to achieve those goals (*I am my own strength, support and energy*; *Calmness is my power*; *Optimism that provides safeness, sense of belonging, acceptance, desire to broaden our horizons*; *My hands are accepting everything and are capable of*

everything, that's why they are a little bit longer). Most of them mention the capacity to extend support to others, to help them and to protect the people they love (*Love emanates from me, as does the need to protect and support dear people*). Some participants mention support they get from important people in their lives as a source of their personal strength, together with their inner strengths and potentials (*Those little dots on the heart are my friends, family, the Roma community and the support I get from all of them. Mushrooms represent my potential and capacity*). Their inner strength stems from the support they received from important others (*This is me, leaning on a pillar that can also be seen as the big backpack I always carry with me*). Roma students believed that they succeeded thanks to their inner hope and persistence, as well as the desire to step out of their comfort zone and prove to themselves and others that they can have a fulfilled and academically successful life (*This is an academic cap, because I think that my knowledge, the one I have and use, is my power*).

Conclusions and recommendations

In this paper, we strived to identify family-, school-, community– and system-related factors, as well as personal factors that were related to academic success of Roma university students in Serbia. Despite a relatively small sample size and the predominance of junior students in the sample, this study yielded several important conclusions.

In accordance with previous studies in Serbia and other countries (Jovanović, 2018; Robayo-Abril & Millan, 2019; SORS & UNICEF, 2014), it was confirmed that Roma students' social contexts were highly unfavourable – their educational trajectories were usually characterized by discrimination by teachers and peers, and, in some cases, by experiencing tough family life. However, such discrimination by teachers, which usually leads towards lower academic achievements (Neblett et al., 2006; Rüppel et al., 2015), did not discourage our participants to pursue their education, which can be explained by a combination of success factors – psychosocial support from some family member (typically, mother), peer and/or teacher, system and the financial support (scholarship and/or affirmative measures) and certain psychological characteristics.

The importance of family support has already been recognized in other studies, which showed that close and warm relations with parents served as a protective factor that built resilience and reduced the negative effects of discrimination (Brody et al., 2006). Moreover, parents' high expectations and aspiration level serve as a strong motivator for children and are in positive correlation with their academic success (Jovanović, 2018; Padfield, 2005). Our participants reported that their parents valued education, motivated them to

continue education and set high expectations for them that they internalised and that helped them in achieving academic success. This is in line with the studies addressing academic success factors of youth from disadvantaged backgrounds (Masten & Reed, 2002; Soenens et al., 2007). At the level of primary education, parents' instructional support was important, while at the secondary school and university level, their psychosocial and financial support played a considerable role. In cases of parents' absence, grandparents or close relatives were the primary source of encouragement.

Apart from family, school staff, peers and local NGO representatives were highlighted as success factors. Teachers were usually mentioned in the context of educational and psychosocial support in secondary schools. Teachers and local NGO representatives also served as role models if they came from an unprivileged background. By setting high expectations and demonstrating trust in Roma students' capacities, teachers helped them to remain proactive and persistent, but also to respect their culture and be proud of their ethnic identity. They also served as a kind of guide through the opportunities that are provided during schooling in terms of pieces of information on scholarships and student grants, possibilities for internships or volunteering and other forms of civic engagement. This is in line with Jovanović (2018), who determined that the existence of role models or mentors helped Roma students succeed in HE. Peers were mentioned in the context of socialization and identity formation and, in some cases, they represented a significant "mediator" between Roma students' personal virtues, Roma background and heritage and general population's expectations and norms.

These findings confirm the relevance of both bonding and bridging social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Although some studies pointed to higher relevance of family-related factors (see e.g., Dufur et al., 2013), in our study we found that both the family role models and support, and the peers and mentors who belonged to other, more privileged groups, but respected and nurtured identity of the marginalized, led together to higher academic achievements. However, we can say that family-related factors may have a more important role in earlier stages of education, when children learn about the value of education and acquire study habits, while the bridging social capital becomes more important in secondary and tertiary education when one needs to socialize, shape own identity and resist institutional racisms more strongly.

Through the analyses of life mottos and personal strengths we could conclude that Roma college students had a high psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007). It seems that strong social capital helped Roma students to develop hope, optimism, and a proactive attitude towards one's own future, which proved to positively affect both their psychological well-being and their motivation and academic success (Catalano et al., 2004; Burton & Dowling, 2005; Isik et al. 2018; Snyder et al. al., 2002).

Scholarships and affirmative measures in enrolling also proved to be a significant success factor that needs to be acknowledged. For most Roma students, the lack of finances was a big obstacle in spite of their parents' efforts to provide enough resources. Some of them believed that they would not have been able to enrol in college and continue their studies without scholarships. Some participants also reported that they had not been well informed about scholarships and other forms of support.

Although recommendations had not been in our focus from the beginning, the conclusions of our study on success factors, along with Roma students' explicit recommendations for policy makers and educational practitioners, motivated us to define several recommendations for practice improvement. First of all, it should be stated that the financial support and affirmative measures for enrolment are necessary, but more thorough information sharing (among Roma) and awareness raising (among the general population) is needed as well. Policy makers and donor organization representatives need to put more effort in reaching out to Roma NGOs and individuals, so that they learn about their rights and sources of support. General population should be better informed through the media about the relevance and implementation of affirmative measures in practice, so that they do not get concerned about their rights. Second, activism and networking (e.g., through extracurricular activities) should be encouraged, especially in secondary school and at college. While teachers tend to focus on remedial classes and provision of additional educational support, they should also be aware of the potential of extracurricular activities for building of the social capital of Roma children. At the HE level, peer mentorship, networking and "self-help" groups for Roma students are needed. More free-of-charge capacity building activities (e.g., language courses, time-management training) should be organized by HE institutions, student organizations, local authorities or NGOs. Contact with a larger number of role models is beneficial, so schools and local communities could invite academically successful Roma to participate in classes and other types of activities with youth. Positive role models must be visible and promoted through all the levels of schooling and in the media. Given such an important role of teachers, both as motivators and those who discriminate, capacity building in inclusive and intercultural education should be organized on an ongoing basis for pre– and in-service teachers. Such training should be implemented, inter alia, by the representatives of the Roma community and NGOs and schools with good practice in inclusive education. Finally, since our study showcased that most participants relied on themselves and considered themselves to be the main cause of success or failure, neglecting at the same time structural inequalities and an oppressive system that denies equal chances for all, additional educational and psychological support to Roma HE students, accompanied with social changes (in order to break down systemic barriers), is recommended.

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Borim se, dakle postojim: Faktori uspešnosti studenata romske nacionalnosti u Srbiji

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Uprkos unapređenju inkluzivnih politika i praksi, studenti romske nacionalnosti i dalje su podzastupljeni u visokom obrazovanju u Srbiji. Glavni cilj ovog istraživanja bio je da se utvrde kontekstualni i lični faktori uspešnosti romskih studenata. Učesnici u istraživanju bili su Romi koji studiraju na četiri državna univerziteta u Srbiji, a koji su popunili upitnik o svom porodičnom i školskom iskustvu, učestvovali u intervjuima o svojim obrazovnim putanjama, kao i u dvodnevnoj radionici posvećenoj osnaživanju studenata kroz podsticanje refleksije o obrazovnim putanjama i ličnim snagama. Kvalitativna tematska analiza primenjena je na sledećem materijalu: odgovorima na jedno pitanje otvorenog tipa o životnim geslima (89 učesnika), intervjuima (20) i narativima i produktima radionice (16). Pokazalo se da su psihološka i obrazovna podrška roditelja i nastavnika, u nekim slučajevima – vršnjaka i romskih nevladinih organizacija, zajedno sa stipendijama i afirmativnim merama pri upisu, bili važni faktori uspeha. Životna gesla studenata pretežno su ukazivala na teme borbe i upornosti. Većina ličnih snaga odnosila se na proaktivnost i optimizam. Ovo ukazuje na visoko razvijen psihološki kapital romskih studenata. Pored kontinuirane finansijske podrške, učesnici su istakli da bi pružanje psihosocijalne podrške, prilika za neformalno učenje i mogućnosti za vršnjačko mentorstvo i umrežavanje rezultiralo većim brojem romskih studenata u visokom obrazovanju.

Ključne reči: studenti romske nacionalnosti, visoko obrazovanje, socijalni kapital, psihološki kapital, Srbija