

## Cultural Differences in School Success

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**Abstract:** *In Albania live together many ethnical groups and one of them is Roma ethnical group. The main focus in this article is the identification of cultural differences in school success. The data in this study are collected through naturalistic observation and survey. It is observed that Roma students have lower success in school than Albanian students. I have studied this phenomenon extensively and have come up with some explanations. When Albanian students enter school, they enter ready – academically, socially, and emotionally – to learn in the school environment. Their parents have read to them since they were infants, so books are familiar friends. They have had experiences sharing toys with other children and have been trained how to handle conflicts in a nonaggressive manner. Not so for many Roma students, who came from a different culture – the culture of the streets. Their parents are forced to prepare them to survive life on the street of the city, rather than to read and write in a classroom. They may not even have seen a picture book before, much less listened as someone read to them. They may never had a chance how to work cooperatively with others or share – they may not have had many toys to share.*

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### 1. Introduction

In Albania, as in many other countries of the world, society is characterized by cultural diversity. In Albania live together different groups of people who differ from each - other by language, customs, manners and behavior as well as by other aspects of life, as for example: Albanians, Roma, Egyptians, Greek minority.

The cultural and ethnic diversity plays a very important role in many aspects of human life, and especially in the education of children. When children start school, they already have absorbed many aspects of the culture in which they are grown, such as language, beliefs, habits, modes of behavior, etc.. The child's culture background may be influenced by his ethnicity, socio-economic status, religious, the spoken language at home and other experiences of the social group to which he belongs. Many of the behaviors that are associated with the fact of being raised in a particular culture, have important implications and consequences in the further education of the child in school.

### 2. The aim of the study

From various observations and meetings with teachers, school psychologists, officials of the Regional Education Directorate, colleagues from different NGOs, students and parents I noticed visible differences between the school results of students coming from Albanian families and those coming from Roma families. Results of children from Roma families are lower. The purpose of this research study is the identification of factors that influence these poor results. The hypothesis was that: the different ethnic, cultural and family background, family planning, elements of inferiority complex, student motivation and expectations of teachers are some of the most significant factors that affect changes in school results between the Albanian and Roma students.

### 3. Methodology

To prove the hypothesis in a scientific way, in this study were carried out two types of research: confidential and natural observation and surveys in three schools in the city of Elbasan, which are distinguishable by the their heterogeneous students. These schools are attended by Albanian and Roma students.

1. *Population:* The difference between school results of students from Albanian families and those coming from Roma families are noticeable to students of all grades of elementary schools, but to study the factors that influence these changes were studied the first-grade students, given the fact that the factors who affect the differences in school performance are more obvious to first grade students. Hence, the theoretical population of this empirical research study is: the first grade students in the city of Elbasan.
2. *The sample:* A total of 450 first grade students of three elementary schools,(225 Albanian students and 225 Romas students), respectively 150 students "Hamit Mullisi" school, 150 from "Abdyl Paralloi" school, 150 from "Sule Misiri" school. Schools were selected in collaboration with the Regional Education Directorate in a noncasual way. The students were selected in a a noncasual way in terms of social, cultural and familiar background, so that the data were more objective, reliable and valid. Students were selected in casual way in terms of their sex.

3. *Methodological steps of research:* The study was complied with all appropriate methodological steps, and almost professional ethics. The followed steps are listed below:
- a) The development of the hypothesis.
  - b) The determination of the theoretical population on which the experiment was conducted.
  - c) The construction of the sample.
  - d) The realization of the pre - test for defining the hypothesis and the technical check of the hypothesis.
  - e) The development of the final draft's version of the questionnaire, in cooperation with representatives of the Regional Education Directorate Elbasan, elementary teachers of selected schools, school psychologists and representatives of NGOs whose activity focus is the Roma community.
  - f) Implementation of the questionnaire. For conducting this questionnaire was taken permission from the Regional Education Directorate Elbasan, and from parents of surveyed students. To them were explained in details the goals, objectives and modalities of the questionnaire within this study. Also they were insured for their children's anonymity and were asked not to speak with their children prior to the questionnaire, so that they are not influenced in their responses from their parents. To the student were also taken their consent of taking part in the questionnaire and were also clarified any ambiguity about the questions and the procedure of the questionnaire completing and were assured that their data will remain confidential. To avoid discrimination in the questionnaire were not asked to determine the ethnicity. Directly after the delivery of each questionnaire completed by Roma students, were secretly marked by me, to enable the distinction of the answers given by the Albanian and Roma students.
  - g) The selection of questionnaires evaluated as regular. Some of the students had made mistakes in completing the questionnaire, they have crossed several alternatives to a question, which made the questionnaire not regarded as regular.
  - h) The data entry and their processing in SPSS program.
  - i) The interpretation of the data.

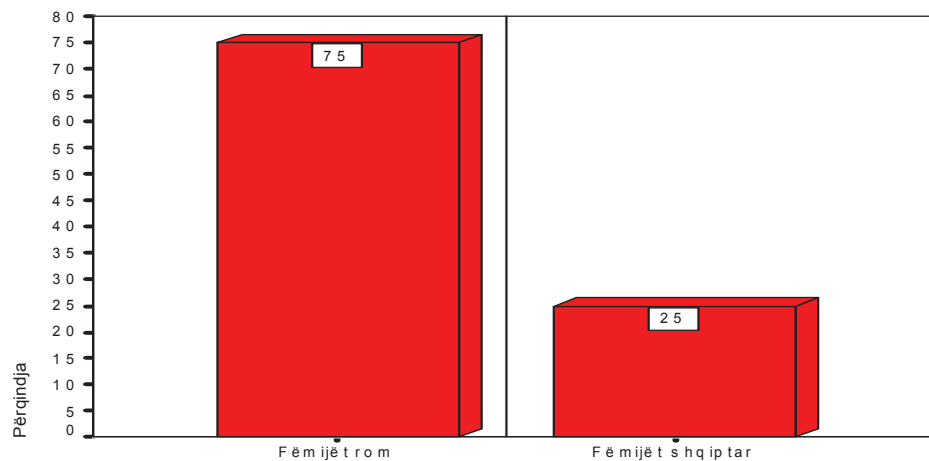
#### 4. The data analysis

Based on intensive observations and the results obtained by statistical processing of questionnaires's data the hypothesis was confirmed. So as the most important factors in the differences of the school's results of Albanian and Roma students are: the different cultural, ethnic and family background, the family planning, elements of the inferiority complex, the student motivation and the teacher expectations.

##### 1) *Different cultural, ethnic and family background*

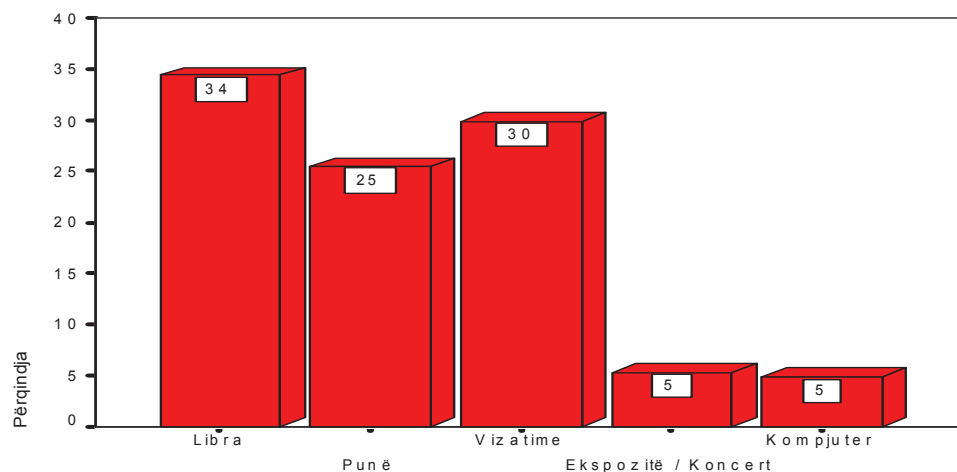
Key elements of culture, who have a significant impact on education of children are: the language, the modes of behavior, etc. There are precisely these elements which are different for students from Albanian and Roma families.

- a) *Language:* In Albanian schools the legally recognized and the used language is the standard Albanian language. It is precisely this language, which must be used by all students who attend schools, students of Albanian families, as well as those of the Roma families. For students coming from Albanian family that is something easier, because it is precisely the same language they have learned to use in their homes. But for children from the Roma families it is rather difficult. In their homes they have already learned to use the language that is spoken from the Roma community and at schools they face a different language. Somehow it could be considered as a "foreign" language, taking into account the fact that they must not only talk and understand complex sentences in Albanian language, but also they must write and read it. As seen in the graphic 75% of the surveyed Roma children have difficulty understanding Albanian standard language, versus 25% of surveyed Albanian children. (See chart 1).

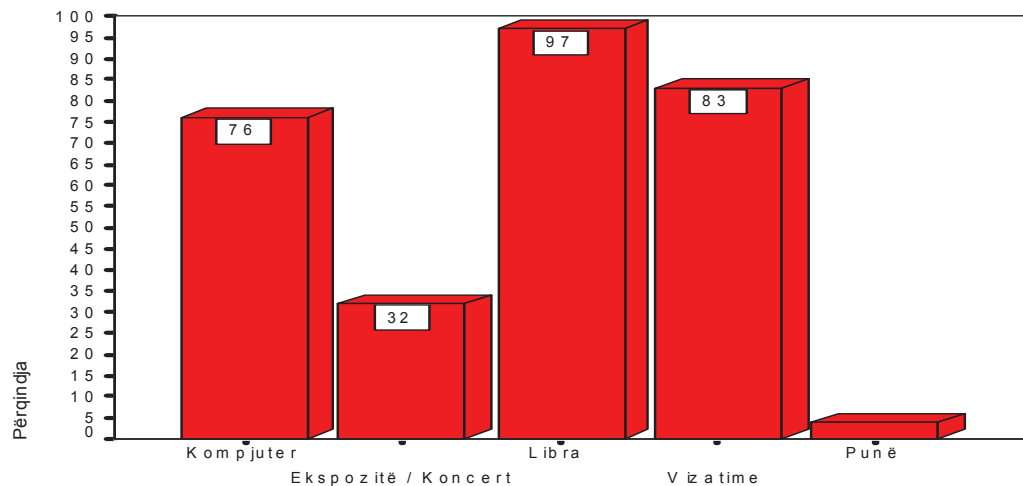


**Chart 1: Difficulties of Roma respondents (75%) and Albanian respondents (25%) in using the standart Albanian language**

- b) *Modes of behavior.* At the time the Albanian students attend school, they are in general more able to follow and apply instructions, to understand and give reasons and to use complex language skills than Roma children. This is due to the fact that Albanian parents generally provide their children the best models for language use, they often talk and read to their children and encourage them to read and perform other educational activities. They are particularly very interested to provide all teaching materials for their children at home like: books, encyclopedia for kids, puzzles, 97% of Albanian respondents, and even computers, 76% of Albanian respondents. They, eventhough not very often, expose their children to learning experiences outside the home, 5% of Albanian respondents, such as: visits to the museum, concerts and exhibitions. 83 % of them have made color drawing and only 2% of them are forced to work. (See chart 3). Albanian parents are more inclined, more willing and more able to engage themselves in the learning process of their children. They have high expectations and require their children to have high marks at school. Almost all the opposite happens with Roma parents. Faced with numerous socio - economic problems, they perceive as their main goal to children their survival. In the case of this study, about 25% of Roma respondents, for survival, are forced to work alongside their parents. And 34% of Roma respondents claim to have had contact with illustrated books for children; 30% have have made color drawing. (See chart 2). But anyway this is still considered a little, in comparison with Albanian children. Roma parents have not attended school regularly and did not have high marks out there, and therefore consider as normal the low results and does not require to their children high marks. In many cases Roma parents do not even own cash to equip their children with appropriate educational tools. The most of Roma parents don't have the appropriate education to support and assist their children in the learning process.



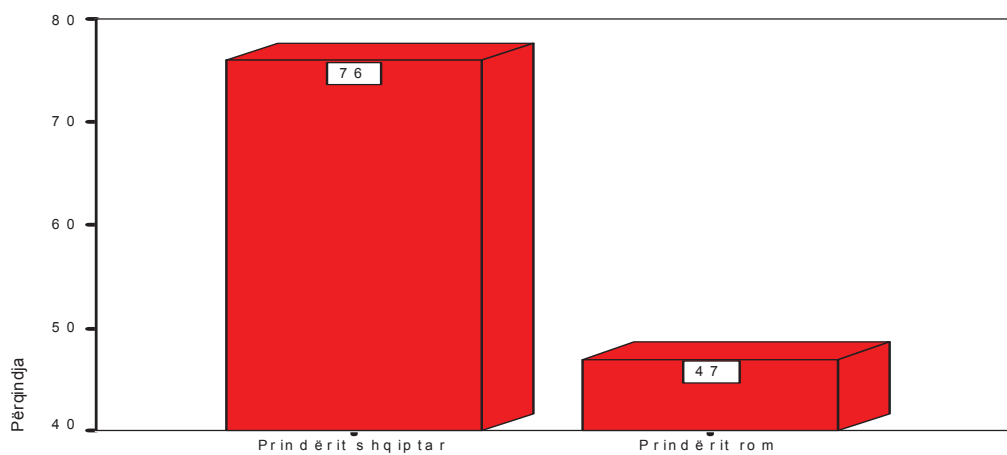
**Chart 2: The use of books (34%), work (25%), drawings (30%), visits to exhibitions and concerts (5%), as well as the the use of computer (5%) of Roma respondents.**



**Chart 3: The use of books (97%), work (2%), the use of computer (76%), drawings (83%), visits to exhibitions and concerts (32%), of Albanian respondents.**

## 2) Family planning

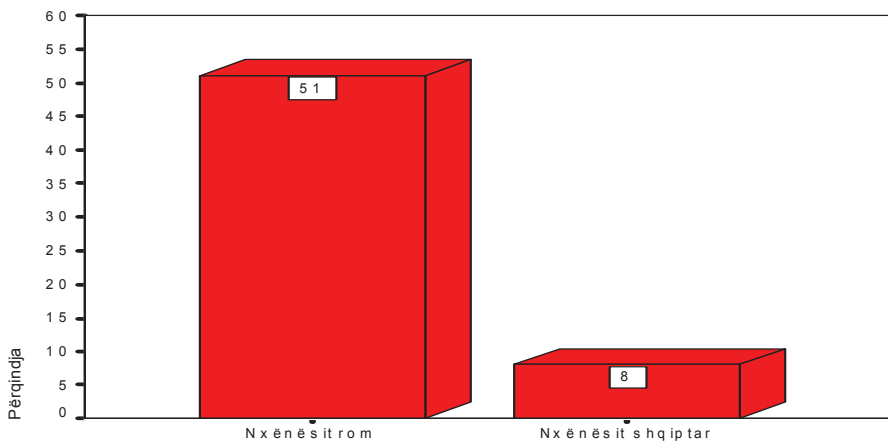
Albanian families mainly tend to have fewer children, on the average 2 to 3 children. Individuals derived from the Albanian families in most cases bring to life children, after having finished college and having secured a job. As a result they have available time and enough money to support their children in the teaching and learning process, 76% of Albanian respondent (See chart 4) admitted that their parents support them in the teaching and learning process. The situation of Roma families is different. They are apt to arise more children, on the average 3 to 5 children. They also bring to life children in a very young age, in most cases after they have finished the elementary school and when they are still unemployed and homeless. As a result they sometimes do not possess the necessary monetary means and time to support their children in the teaching and learning process. 47% of Roma respondent admitted that their parents don't support them in the teaching and learning process.



**Chart 4: The support of Albanian - (76%) and Roma parents (47%) to their children in the teaching and learning process**

## 3) Inferiority complex elements.

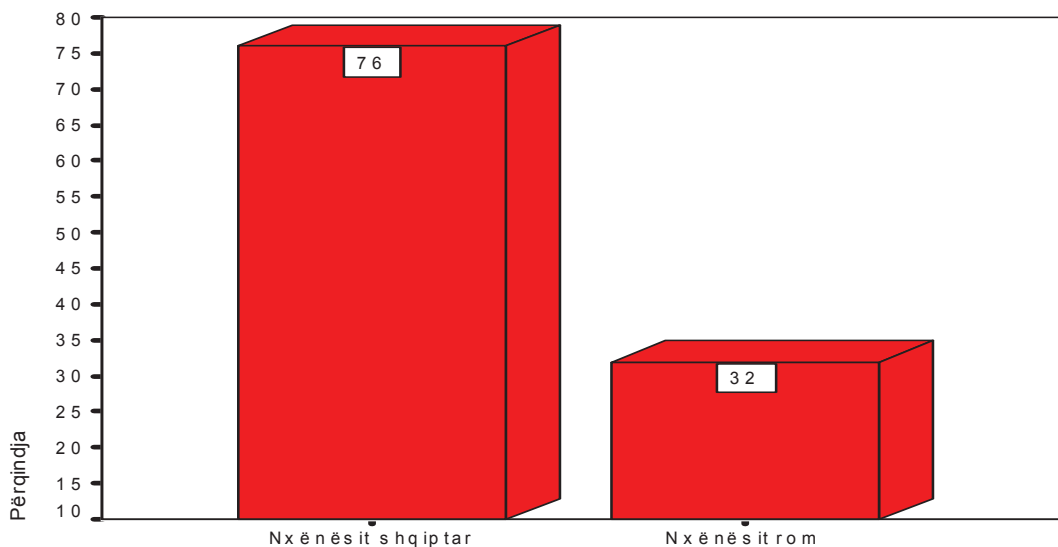
The collective unconscious of the Roma community is an element which affects noticeably in negative self-perception of Roma children. Being part of a community, which often mistakenly is labeled as "illiterate", Roma children exhibit elements of inferiority complex, which prevents them achieve higher grades in school. They unconsciously perceive themselves as unable to learn. Albanian parents in most cases have enough confidence in their children's abilities to succeed and they transmit that confidence to their own children; and the children naturally tend to reach that what they believe they can achieve.



**Chart 5: The presence of elements of the complex of inferiority among Albanian respondent (8%) and Roma respondent (51%).**

4) *The student's motivation*

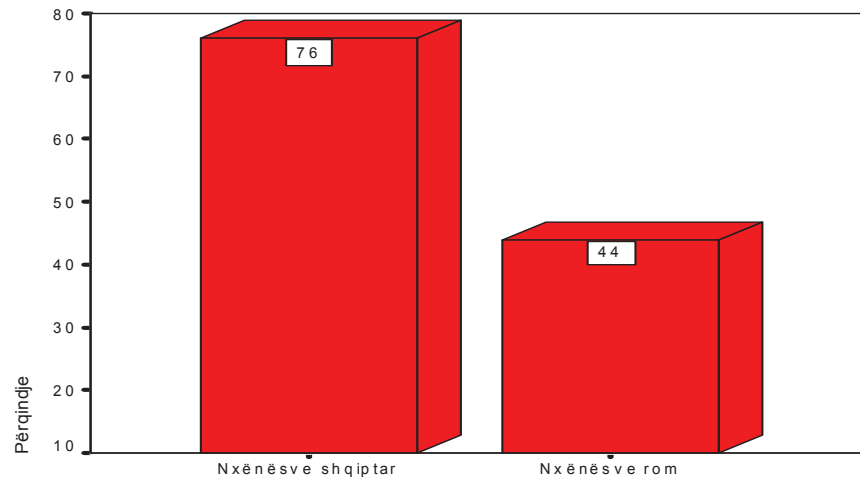
Albanian parents express high academic expectations for their children and praise and reward them for their intellectual development. Albanian children tend to perceive themselves as "superior" in terms of social or intellectual aspects against Roma children. Albanian students are much more motivated, 76% of Albanian respondents admitted to be motivated for success and high grades in school. (See chart 6). Motivation, hope and faith in themselves that will succeed is an important factor for their high grades.



**Chart 6: Motivation for high grades of Albanian respondents (76%) and Roma respondents (32%).**

5) *Teacher's expectations*

Mainly in Albanian schools are reflected the cultural values and norms of Albanian families and the most teachers belong to this culture. Students belonging to the Roma culture mainly suffer disadvantages and inferiority. Even the teachers themselves in their expectations and providing tasks discriminate the Roma students. They have lower expectations and give Roma children easier task than those to Albanian students, always based on the idea that the Roma students do not inspire or are not able to perform difficult or complex tasks. 76% of Albanian students, versus 44% of Roma pupils, say teachers expect high scores on them. ( See chart 7).



**Chart 7: Teacher expectations on Albanian (76%) and Roma respondents (44%)**

### 5. The limits of the study

This study contains a number of restrictions. *First*, the number of sample of this study is relatively small which may not allow generalization to all populations. *Second*, given the fact that this study has been conducted only by me, could have elements of subjectivity. *Thirdly*, not all the possible variables are taken into consideration.

### 6. Conclusions and suggestions

Students vary. They differ in terms of performance level, learning styles and learning rate. They differ in terms of ethnic, cultural and linguistic skills. These differences are noticed enough to Roma and Albanian children, differences that affect a lot in the differences between their results at school.

Cultur profoundly affects teaching and learning. Many aspects of culture contribute to the learner's identity and self-concept and affect the learner's belief and values, attitudes and expectations, social relations, language use, and other behaviors.

Differences in terms of ethnic, cultural and social class are factors that have a very significant impact on changes in school performance and especially low grades. Family environment greatly affects the above differences. Roma pupils come from an environment lacking the appropriate social service and health and other factors that reduce motivation, achievements and their mental health. Also teachers have low expectations of Roma children and this affects their motivation and their academic achievements. Home environment influences not only academic readiness for school, but also the level of student's achievement.

The stereotype can be wrong. Roma children should not be regarded as unable to achieve high scores in school. If they receive proper attention, the situation may change. However, the mere fact that some children initially do not know what is expected of them and have fewer entry-level skills than others, does not mean that they are destined for academic failure. I suggest to the parents to express high expectations for their children and to reward them for intellectual development. I also suggest them to provide good models for language use, to talk and read to their children frequently, and to encourage reading and other learning activities and especially to help their children to succeed in school and to be involved in their education.

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