Schooling for Roma Children: Challenges and Practices

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Abstract

Throughout the 21st century, the equality and inclusion of vulnerable groups has been a constant theme in international debates and on the official agendas of international organisations. In the area of education, the participation of children belonging to these groups is a challenge in all countries, whether or not they have high enrolment rates for the general population. In Greece, the Roma community is considered the most socially vulnerable group. Roma children face significant challenges in terms of education and wider social integration. Schooling programmes for Roma children have been planned in Greece since the end of the last century. However, despite positive ex-post evaluations of these programmes, the expected results have not been achieved. The evaluation of these programmes identifies four distinct stages in the schooling process: (a) Families' decisions regarding the value of their children's school attendance; (b) Cultivating a culture of reducing bureaucratic-administrative issues related to enrolment; (c) Establishing support structures for Roma pupils during their stay in school; and (d) Implementing actions to promote the effective development of knowledge, skills, and competencies of Roma pupils in the school environment. National-level studies have shown that the attendance of Roma children is a complex social phenomenon that extends beyond the educational process. This paper presents a research study conducted in Greece, in comparison with the European level. At the initial research, the University of Patras conducted field research as part of the 'Integration of Roma Children in School' programme, which was funded by the Ministry of Education and the EU. For further analysis of the original data, a qualitative approach of text analysis was employed, utilizing specialized reports from international (European) organizations and national reports from the Ministry of Education in the context of relevant programmes and actions.

Keywords: Roma students, inclusive education, vulnerable groups, Greek schooling programs
1. Introduction: Setting the (wider) scene of inclusion and education in the 21st century

The dominant view in the current debate on education in all international organisations is that, in a rapidly changing economy that follows the pace of globalisation, it is necessary to equip people with all the necessary knowledge, skills and competences to adapt successfully to the fluid and highly complex reality that revolves around the central concepts of productivity and economic competition (Mouzelis, 1998).

At the same time, however, education and training systems face the major challenge of ensuring equitable access to quality education, particularly with regard to the participation of people from disadvantaged groups and different backgrounds. The issue of social inclusion in the education system appears to be under-addressed (European Commission, 2019). Moreover, it is an issue even in those educational systems where they have high enrolment rates for the general population (Guyon et al., 2015; Downes et al., 2017; Hanemann et al., 2018; Unesco, 2021). According to a 2020 report by Unesco, the problem lies not in the total educational resources and capacities, but in their unequal distribution:

- 258 million young people (who should be in school), which is 17% of the global total, are not receiving any education;
- In low and middle-income countries, young people from families in the top 20% of the income scale are three times more likely to complete compulsory education than those from families at the bottom of the income scale;
- In 10 low and middle-income countries, children with disabilities are almost 20% less likely than other children to achieve minimum reading proficiency;
- The data shows that discrimination is common in relation to gender, remoteness, wealth, disability, ethnicity, nationality, language, migration, sexual orientation, identity and religion;
- In Europe, children from Roma families often participate in education, but are often placed in special education units.

Therefore, the issue is on promoting inclusion and creating equitable education systems. To define equitable education, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of 'equality' and 'equity'. Equality refers to a state of affairs, such as results that can be observed in inputs, outputs, or outcomes. Equity, on the other hand, refers to a process of actions aimed at ensuring equality (Unesco, 2020). It is important to note that equity is not synonymous with equality.

However, the discussion of inclusive education is complex as the process cannot be distinguished from its outcomes. As a process, inclusive education aims to contribute to improved social inclusion. Some social groups have lower rates of enrolment, retention, and achievement in the learning process (of those pupils who remain in education). These findings primarily reflect the socio-economic processes that lead to frustration, marginalization, and alienation of young people and later adults. Save the Children (2017) states that poverty and discrimination often lead to the exclusion of individuals from certain groups based on their identity. The distribution and nature of opportunities, particularly in a child's early years, have a significant and ongoing impact on their educational integration. It is crucial to address these socio-economic mechanisms and functions. Additionally, the structural features of the education system, such as the physical environment of schools (classrooms, schoolyards), collaboration between parents and teachers, and the conditions for cooperation and coordination between the local community and administration, also have a significant impact (Unesco, 2020).
A related issue is the long-standing phenomenon of students’ dropout, which has similar causes as it is mainly related to economic and social inequalities, the interaction between school and family culture, but also to the educational system itself and its actors (Official Journal of the European Union, 2015). The phenomenon seems to be much more related to the issue of social exclusion, which is associated in a self-feeding circle with other negative phenomena such as low educational attainment, lack of democracy, social delinquency, disadvantaged professional rehabilitation, unemployment, poverty (Richardson & Le Grand, 2002).

However, this framework prompts the question: how are policies regarding the participation of Roma children in school specified? Trying to answer this question, we will first refer to the developments at the European level and then we will focus on the national-Greek one.

1.1 Research Methodology

The paper focuses on the school education of Roma children in Greece. The initial research involved a field study conducted in the Peloponnese region of Greece. The fieldwork carried out by a team of 18 research associates, mainly postgraduate students from two Departments\(^1\) of the University of Patras, who also collaborated with 93 educators, most of whom were working in education in the Peloponnese region at the time of the research. The fieldwork also included 11 Roma coordinators. At the second level of analysis, we also employed the qualitative method of text analysis. This involved using specialized reports from international (European) organizations and national reports from the Ministry of Education, in the context of relevant programmes and actions.

2. Inclusion and schooling of Roma children: European developments

In June 1997, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia was established as part of a coordinated action to combat racism and xenophobia. In 2006, the Centre published a report on the access of Roma and Travelers to public education systems in the European Union. Roma students appear to continue experiencing systematic discrimination and exclusion in education. This is linked to interrelated reasons such as particular living conditions, problematic housing and access to health services, and high levels of parental unemployment (EUMC\(^2\), 2006).

The data show that enrolment and attendance rates in primary education are low in most countries. Low attendance and high absenteeism can be linked to two reasons: (a) the belief that Roma families underestimate the importance of education (they often do not see any direct benefit for their children from participating in education); (b) the fact that school administrators and members of the school community in general have a more flexible attitude towards the attendance of Roma children. In fact, educational structures mainly develop segregating practices indirectly, either through educational policy decisions or due to residential segregation. In addition to indirect discrimination and exclusion in education, there are other factors that are crucial for participation in schooling:

- Exclusion from education can be due to a lack of formal documents required for initial enrolment or the direct or indirect costs associated with a child's participation;

\(^1\) Department of Primary Education and the Department of Early Childhood education.

\(^2\) EUMC: European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. The EUMC for more than a decade has been converted it into the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA).
– Given the unusually high rates of Roma children being placed in special education classes\(^3\), it appears that this form of segregation also exists;
– Educational materials that relate to the life, habits and culture of Roma families are not available, resulting in a lack of activities that can be linked to the experiences of Roma children;
– Teachers are often not adequately trained to manage a multicultural classroom, which, combined with less than ideal working conditions, can lead to burnout and an indifferent attitude;
– Instances of racism, insults, and harassment towards Roma children are unfortunately common in school environments;
– Low participation rates in pre-school education can result in an inability to follow basic school rules and develop necessary language skills;
– The low level of education among Roma parents often results in insufficient support for their children's learning and lowers their expectations for their children's education;
– The discrimination and prejudice experienced by Roma parents hinder their ability to recognize that providing better education for their children can enhance their chances of employment and overall life improvement; (EUMC, 2006).

In 2013, the European Council recommended effective integration measures and urged member states to end the 'inappropriate placement' of Roma students in special education units. The recommendation highlighted that Roma people experience poverty, social exclusion, racism, discrimination, violence, and obstacles to the exercise of their fundamental rights, which can lead to exploitation\(^4\). Roma children face exclusion due to a lack of formal birth registration and identification. This is compounded by low participation in pre-school education and high rates of school failure among those who continue in primary education. The data show that Roma children in the EU encounter significant barriers when accessing quality education services (Official Journal of the European Union, 2013).

Member States should take effective measures to ensure equal treatment and full access for Roma children to quality education services. It is recommended that they set a target of completing at least compulsory education. Measures include: (a) combating school segregation, (b) bringing the enrolment rate of Roma children in special educational units closer to the national rate, (c) reducing early school leaving in all forms of education and pre-school education, (d) increase access to and participation in pre-school education, (e) identifying and addressing the needs of Roma pupils on an individual basis, with appropriate support for their families, (f) using inclusive and personalised teaching and learning methods to support pupils with learning difficulties, combating illiteracy and promoting the availability and use of extra-curricular activities, (g) encouraging parental involvement and improving teacher training, (h) promoting the participation of Roma in upper secondary and tertiary (or higher) education, (i) increasing access to lifelong learning to acquire skills and competences necessary for the labour market. Measures are also proposed beyond education. These

\(^3\) Overrepresentation of Roma children diagnosed with intellectual disabilities and placed in special education units as in Hungary (Van den Bogaert, 2018) and Slovakia (Amnesty International and European Roma Rights Centre, 2017).

\(^4\) For example through trafficking in human beings.
measures include those related to access to employment, healthcare, and housing, as well as policies on several policies areas for anti-discrimination (Official Journal of the European Union, 2013).

However, surveys and reports conducted shortly after previous decisions and proposals indicate that despite being the largest ethnic minority in the EU with a population of around 12 million, Roma people still face deep poverty, discrimination, and prejudice (FRA, 2014). For instance, in Hungary, the number of schools with over half of their students being Roma children has increased from 10% in 2008 to 15% in 2017, leading to increased segregation (European Commission, 2019).

According to the 2016 survey analysis by FRA, 80% of Roma people continue to live below their country's poverty threshold, and a third of them lack access to drinking water. Additionally, 10% of Roma households do not have electricity, and 25% of Roma families report experiencing hunger at least once in the previous month. The survey data shows that educational indicators for children from Roma families are below the national average. Only 50% of Roma children of the relevant age are enrolled in pre-school education. Furthermore, 2 out of 10 Roma in schooling age attend a class or level of education that is lower than what is appropriate for their age (FRA, 2016).

**Figure 1: Children participation in early childhood education (in 9 European Union Member States)**

The Roma community has a significantly higher rate of early school leaving than the general population. School segregation remains a problem in Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia, despite legislation banning the practice and recent case law from the European Court of Human

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5 FRA: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.
Rights. (FRA, 2016). As a result, the proportion of the Roma population aged 16-24 that could be considered as NEET\(^6\) is relatively high.

**Figure 2: Percentage of Roma persons being “NEETs” (in 9 European Union Member States)**

This “picture” suggests that the situation has not improved over the last decade. As a result, the European Union and the Council of Europe have decided to launch a joint project called 'Inclusive Schools: Making a Difference for Roma Children'. The programme aims to increase awareness of inclusive education among teachers and the wider population. It provides resources and develops actions for innovative inclusive schools, supporting teachers in implementing teaching approaches and projects that promote inclusivity and reduce barriers for disadvantaged groups (Council of Europe, 2019).

### 3. Schooling of Roma children in Greece\(^7\): Experience from programs’ implementation

As in other European countries, Gypsies and Roma in Greece are divided into different groups and sub-groups based on descriptive characteristics such as language, religion, work

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\(^6\) NEET: Young people who are *Not in Employment, Education or Training*.

\(^7\) In the Greek education system, attendance is mandatory for children aged 6-15 years. Pre-school education structures exist, but all children begin compulsory education at age 6 by entering the 1st grade of primary school, which lasts for 6 years. At the age of 12, pupils in Greece enter the *Gymnasium* (lower secondary education) for a further three years of study. Upon completion of studies at the Gymnasium (at the age of 15), the compulsory education period is completed. Students who wish to continue their education can enroll in *Lykeio* (upper secondary examination) for an additional three years. Upon completion of these studies, they may pursue post-secondary or higher education.
and housing patterns, nationality (Greek, Turkish, Bulgarian, Albanian, Romanian), different levels of education and integration into the wider society (Kiprianos et al., 2012).

Important and interesting data emerge from several studies on the relative programme innovations for the inclusion of Roma children in Greek education. At the level of educational policy, the beginning seems to be in the 1980s. At that time, the Ministry of Education established a series of working groups to study the issue of Roma education (Vassiliadou & Pavli-Korre, 2011). From the late 1990s onwards, large-scale programmes were set up, mainly through the “National Education and Initial Vocational Training Programmes” (EPEAEK I and II). These were usually entrusted to universities and, with some interim management gaps in funding, have continued to the present day. From this ongoing experience, it is possible to highlight the main facts, the axes, the weaknesses of these interventions and possible recommendations. In previous research, it was stated that these programmes although their results were not disappointing the expectations have not been achieved (Nikolaou 2009; Stamelos 2019).

In this paper, we will outline the basic data and key issues relating to Roma education in Greece from this first period of implementation of these intervention programmes.

First, it is important to understand the relationship between Roma and education in the Greek context. Education, as we know it, is not integrated into the lives of Roma, nor is it seen as an obvious and integral part of their culture. It is seen as something outside and beyond what they are used to. For many Roma families, daily life is a struggle to survive or a passive acceptance of absolute poverty; when housing, food and security are not guaranteed, education can seem too ambitious. Livelihood solutions are also extremely limited, and in terms of the economic dimension, a Roma family's income from various welfare benefits is important. One benefit that has boosted enrolment, but not necessarily attendance, and which has been another source of tension between Roma and Greek schools, is the enrolment allowance.

The residential and health dimension is a crucial component in this context. The housing situation of numerous Roma families in Greece is substandard. It is difficult for individuals living in cold, wet, and muddy conditions during winter and suffering from heat and skin diseases during summer to take an interest in and find a place for the educational process. The issue of vaccination is also significant. Furthermore, children who live in extreme poverty may face rejection upon arriving at school. In relation to the social and cultural dimension, it is not expected, but Roma families are overprotective of their children. While the children have practically no childhood and from a very young age the older ones take care of the younger ones, as well as they may be alone in their place of residence, at the same time the fact of moving alone to school is an important issue. Furthermore, it is common for Roma children to marry at a young age. At the age of 11, girls are prohibited from being “teased” or “stolen”. At 12 or 13 girls are often married, while boys tend to marry at a slightly older age.

The above shows that Roma inclusion and retention in compulsory education is an educational issue, but not an exclusively educational one. Therefore, treating it as such would limit the potential gains from implementing any programs or interventions.

Regarding the Greek education system, schools that enrol Roma children can be classified into two categories: those with a small number of Roma pupils which represent a small percentage

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8 Elements of the text have been extracted from the 2007 Annual Report: Ministry of Education – EPEAEK II. University of Thessaly, Programme "Integration of Gypsy Children in School" - Annual Report - Region of Peloponnese (2007).

9 It is the fifth year of primary school in Greece.
of the total number of students, and those with a high percentage of Roma pupils. In the former, they can be managed more easily using common sense and current pedagogical tools. In the latter, they should be treated as 'special schools' to avoid significant problems. Furthermore, surveys have shown that teachers in Greece (and potentially elsewhere) tend to work primarily with their top-performing students rather than the entire class. This habit can create significant tension in the classroom, particularly for Roma pupils who may not have a well-established school and education code.

Regarding the management of programmes in educational policy, a focus issue arises. The main approach is to maximize the absorption of European funds, which can often come at the expense of intervention effectiveness. Since the beginning of the relevant programs, there have been frequent interruptions. Judging the effectiveness of the intervention in a given population by its longevity and stability, it is difficult to be optimistic about its continuity as there have been no apparent changes to these characteristics.

Kiprianos, Daskalaki, and Stamelos (2012) attempted to evaluate the schooling programmes of Roma children in Greece, with a focus on the Peloponnese region. They found that the participation rate of Roma children in primary education is low in this region; the majority of Roma children living in the Peloponnese do not attend primary school because they are not even enrolled. However, there are significant regional differences in participation rates within the prefectures of the Peloponnese. Additionally, the number of Roma children continuing their education from one school year to the next is decreasing in all regions. Further analysis of the data showed:

- Late attendance of school classes is a significant issue among Roma children. For example, one in six Roma children attend classes one year behind their age, while one in eight attend classes two years behind their age, and one in ten attend classes three or more years behind their age.

- Only one out of four Roma children who participate in education live in 'very good' or 'fairly decent' conditions, meaning they have access to basic facilities such as sanitation, water, and electricity. 55% of the children live in 'fairly poor conditions', meaning they reside in makeshift shacks with doors and windows, or in 'poor conditions', meaning they live in tents or makeshift shacks without doors and windows.

- Only 10% of children lived in families with 'good' or 'very good' economic conditions, meaning they had sufficient income for housing, food, and clothing. In contrast, 30% of children lived in 'extreme poverty', with poor housing conditions and inadequate clothing and food.

- With regards to their participation in education, half of the children lacked basic literacy and numeracy skills or had already dropped out of school. If we include the fact that approximately 10% of enrolled children never attend school, then a total of 60% of children possess only basic 'school' knowledge and skills. (Kiprianos et al., 2012).

In addition to the above characteristics, it is worth noting that other studies conducted in Greece and Europe have found that Roma families often encourage their children, both boys and girls, to participate in non-formal gender-related activities and prepare them for their future life after marriage. This type of informal learning takes place within extended family networks and alongside formal schooling, which can pose challenges to successful participation in education.

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10 I.e. 20% to 25%.
Kiprianos et al. (2012) found that Roma students have difficulties in balancing their responsibilities within the rigid school curriculum with their responsibilities within their family context. Moreover, the level of integration of most Roma children in school life is remarkably low. The inclusion of Roma children in education is often influenced by factors beyond education, such as gender, living conditions, the location of their home and school, and the attitudes of the school and the wider local community. It is important to note that these factors can have a determining influence. It is therefore essential to address them in order to improve the educational integration of Roma children.

4. Conclusion: Schooling of Roma children in Greece

Regarding the unsatisfactory participation of Roma children in education, it can be categorised into the following levels:

At the individual level, reduced opportunities for labour market integration in Roma communities can lead to feelings of bitterness and failure, further marginalising Roma youth. Simultaneously, it appears that the prospect of solely obtaining low-paying employment persists, without any assurance of obtaining fundamental social benefits, social security, and healthcare. Concerning the societal level, when young Roma individuals lack education or training, their constructive potential remains unutilised by society, increasing the probability of them engaging in anti-social (or criminal) behaviour. In economic terms, the non-participation or drop-out of Roma children from education and training systems can reduce their opportunities to earn an income. Even if they do, it is often lower than that of the skilled workforce or graduates. At this point it should be noted that these findings are also present in previous relative researches at European level (EUMC, 2006, FRA, 2014 and FRA, 2016). Therefore, appropriate interventions to improve the effective participation of Roma children in education are necessary. At the national (Greek) level, it is necessary to consider the various specificities and challenges beyond just educational level when making decisions and taking action. In this regard, some suggestions can be formulated. It is worth noting, however, that most of the proposals were also included in an earlier report (Ministry of Education – EPEAEK II. University of Thessaly, Programme "Integration of Gypsy Children in School" - Annual Report - Region of Peloponnese, 2007) as the issues and particularities seem to resist time and they are always coming to the fore.

- Ensuring the duration and stability of the programs is a prerequisite for the effectiveness of their actions and interventions.
- Sufficient funding and consistent payments for each program must be ensured.
- Implementation flexibility should be increased to ensure effective and efficient implementation of the programs.
- Multi-faceted and multi-level intervention efforts should be aimed at improving the overall living conditions of Roma in Greece. It is important that any program is aligned with other actions, such as housing loans, programs for Roma entrepreneurship, and organized and stable procedures for vaccinating Roma children.
- Incentives (non-subsidies) should be created to encourage continued education.
- Support should be provided for the labour integration of educated Roma, as it appears that few Roma who complete secondary or tertiary education have difficulty finding work relevant to their skills due to their origin. This is a crucial point. If those who have
studied have not improved their choices because of their education, then their attempt to participate in education loses all legitimacy.

- Establish nurseries and kindergartens in Roma camps with stable teaching staff.
- Include schools with a high percentage of Roma children in a special category of schools and allow for different class compositions.
- Create incentives for teachers to remain in these schools.
- Addressing the lack of socialization and bilingualism among Roma children should be done in special places to avoid disrupting the functioning of the school.
- To facilitate the schooling of Roma children in primary school, experiential learning through the project method could be employed. This would require changes in the school curriculum.
- The selection of teachers for schools with a high concentration of Roma children should not be accidental, and their initial professional training should be specialized.

This article aims to emphasize that the schooling of Roma children in Greece (and, more broadly, in Europe) is a multifaceted process that extends beyond the educational sphere. To design effective programs, individual actions that involve areas beyond education must be considered. Thus, actions and interventions will involve the state, educational policy choices, the school system, teachers, social workers, families, settlement infrastructure, home infrastructure, health and healthcare support, and labour market entry without discrimination based on origin.

References


