



THE SCHOOL DROPOUT OF ROMA STUDENTS: A RESEARCH EFFORT ON THE CAUSES OF THE PHENOMENON

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Abstract:

The group of Roma, who live and work in Greece, has failed to face the social prejudice regarding their social integration so far. The school dropout rate of Roma students, which in many cases confirms the inability of their school integration, also contributes to this. In addition, school integration is a prerequisite for the smooth social integration of students with social, cultural, economic, or learning difficulties. The purpose of this research is to investigate and identify the reasons that reinforce the phenomenon of school dropout of Roma students. Specifically, it investigates the views of 10 current Primary School Principals, which Roma students also attend, through semi-structured interviews. The conclusion drawn is that the cultural-socioeconomic background of the Roma is a deterrent to their normal schooling.

Keywords: research, Roma pupils, primary school, school dropout, directors of primary education schools

1. Introduction

In recent years, one of the most important social problems in Greece is the way that Roma are treated by the Greek educational system, due to the special characteristics of the specific socio-cultural group. Their differentiation is attributed to the manner that family is shaped, to their different language, their low socio-economic and cultural background, and to their differentiated way of life (Nova-Kaltsouni, 2004).

These characteristics are attributed to the creation of cultural stereotypes, which lead to the internalization of a negative image of themselves and to the reduction of their self-esteem and self-confidence (Azizi-Kalatzi, Zoniou-Sideri & Vlachou, 1996).

This fact leads to their devaluation towards society and school, having as a consequence their incomplete attendance and the increase of school dropout cases. Less than half of the Roma attend primary school and most drop out of school before completing it (Polychroni & Ralli, 2013).

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The choice of the topic was based on the effort to investigate the causes that contribute to the intensification of the phenomenon. The paper consists of the following chapters: 1. Introduction, 2. Theory, 3. Methodology, 4. Presentation and analysis of research results, 5. Conclusions and recommendations.

2. Theory

2.1 Clarification of terms

2.1.1 Roma

Roma population constitutes a traditional nomadic population that moves at the transnational level and is treated in a highly discriminatory manner by the rest of society, resulting in problems in their social integration. In Greece, there are about 250,000 Roma and they are distinguished, primarily, for their different cultural background, which is considered a key component of their collective identity. They belong to dissimilar tribes and the majority of them are Orthodox Christians, while Muslims are only those who live in Western Thrace. Divergence is also observed in their economic situation, as there are economic inequalities in the different Roma tribes. The most important problem that Roma face is the problem of their housing. Their residence most of the time in illegal camps and the violation of municipal or private facilities, in order to create these camps, provoke strong reactions from other social groups, as well as their marginalization. In addition to their housing, the health problems that they face, due to poor living conditions are of particular interest. The lack of social security creates problems in their health care, thus intensifying the difficulties and their equal access to health services (Lydaki, 2013).

2.1.2 School dropout

There are three groups of causes that lead to the interruption of schooling of children having Roma origin: a) causes that are linked to the educational system (teachers' indifference, long school distance from the camp, etc.), b) causes that are linked to the way of life of Gypsies and their perception of education (travel, early marriages, etc.), c) attitudes of non-Gypsies towards Gypsies (prejudices, etc.) (Vassiliadou, 2000).

The high school dropout rate is attributed to the fact that they have to "*stay at home to help with the chores*". The prevalence of the patriarchal perception that woman's destination is the creation of a family and the fear of "tarnishing" the family name leads to early school dropout (Vaxevanoglou, 2001).

2.2 Intercultural education

Therefore, in the modern globalized society, the implementation of intercultural dialogue is considered to be promoted through the strengthening of intercultural education and the equal access of all students to education, thus ensuring social justice in the educational process. For that reason, the priority of the modern school is the smooth integration of

students into school and the wider social reality and the stimulation of respect and tolerance towards any diversity (Gotovos, 2002).

In this way, the prevention of dangerous phenomena is aimed, such as school dropout or school failure of minorities. It is clear that intercultural education is based on its multidimensional nature, while also encompassing the macro-level of the state and its institutional structures, the middle-level of the school, and the micro-level of the classroom (Hajisoteriou, 2009).

Intercultural education concerns all educational levels and is promoted, mostly, through the actions, perceptions, and initiatives of all those involved in the educational process, who are called to implement the various state policies for the promotion of intercultural dialogue, depending on the circumstances (Nikolaou, 2000).

In order for the implementation of intercultural education to be successful and effective, the key factors are perceived to be the utilization of the educational process for the cultivation of students' skills, the proper teaching of the Greek language, the prevention of school bullying, the support of minorities through the required special programs and the respect for the specificities of minorities. Additionally, special emphasis should be given to educating teachers regarding the successful management of minorities and ensuring social justice in the educational process (Angelides, Stylianou & Leigh, 2004).

It should also be addressed that the way in which intercultural education is organized and implemented is determined by the broader socio-economic conditions, but also the specificities of minorities, highlighting in this way the prominence of proper evaluation of these parameters for systematic planning and successful implementation of intercultural education programs (Powell, R., 2000).

Additionally, it must be clarified that through its implementation, the elimination of stereotypes, the exploitation of multiculturalism, and the achievement of equal access of all students to the modern school reality is sought, thus preventing various conflicts in school units, which may threaten their proper functioning (Vlachos, 2009).

It is also clear that intercultural education becomes necessary due to the inability of the teachers to manage multicultural classes, but also their limited training programs, resulting in a variety of problems in student' participation in the educational process. The most important of these problems are found in their racist confrontation, school dropout or failure, and in their wider social isolation, which is attributed to the social prejudices that prevail in Greek society regarding the Roma population (Panayiotopoulos & Nicolaidou, 2007).

At the same time, today in the field of Greek education the way of organization and implementation of the educational process, based on school infrastructure, the content of curricula and textbooks, but also the way of evaluating student performance makes it difficult for minorities to smoothly adapt, disrupting their mental balance and increasing school dropout cases. For that reason, the strengthening of intercultural education is considered significant and it is necessary to stimulate the effort for the smooth integration of minorities into the school reality. In addition, the modern Greek

school, as it has already been mentioned, needs to defend the right to the equal participation of all students in the educational process, cultivating intercultural dialogue in the field of Greek education and enabling multicultural groups, such as Roma, to emphasize their abilities and skills (Evangelou & Kantzou, 2005).

2.3 The presence of Roma and their treatment by the modern school system

In recent years, Greek society has acquired a multicultural character, which brings to the fore the existence of social inequalities and the cultivation of stereotypes. This multicultural character is also reflected in the field of education, provoking the interest of many scholars. Modern classrooms are distinguished for the modification in the composition of the student population and for their intercultural character, which makes it necessary to reduce xenophobia and defend the equal participation of all students in knowledge. This intercultural character is promoted by the participation in the educational process of immigrants, repatriated, and Roma (Markou, 2010).

A basic principle of intercultural education is respect for the culture of each diversity. Unfortunately, however, in the modern Greek educational system, the weaknesses of showing respect to the Roma culture are apparent. It is also considered that the Greek educational system lacks the necessary flexibility to prevent the implementation of an assimilation policy, which works to the detriment of social justice in education and creates problems for equal access of Roma to the educational procedure. The difficulties that Roma have to face during their studies are found in the way that curricula are designed, in the application of educational methods, and in the selection of other students' preparation practices (Damanakis, 2002).

The overall picture of the relationship of Roma with the Greek educational system is presented by the high illiteracy rates, which reach 80% in older age. In this way, it is confirmed that the Roma are marginalized by the Greek education system and are deprived of opportunities for equal participation in the educational procedure, while it is argued that the educational policy reflects the broader policy towards Roma. A key factor in their unequal treatment is thought to be the lack of training of teachers, who are unable to implement effective practices of education and management of students with different cultural backgrounds (Marcelos, 1985).

Nevertheless, it should be noted, that in recent years the implementation of programs has been sought, which will facilitate their access to knowledge. Already since 1994, the creation of reception classes or tutoring departments has been promoted, with the ultimate goal of effective management of Roma, but also of immigrants and repatriates. With the creation of the preparatory classes for the Gypsy children, it was considered that their school attendance could be facilitated and the cases of school failure or dropout could be prevented (Markou, 2008).

Moreover, in the context of the implementation of intercultural education, it was considered as important to strengthen cooperation between all those involved in the educational process in order to effectively address the problems that Roma face at school. A significant initiative in this direction is the decision of the Ministry of Education,

Research and Religious Affairs regarding the implementation of the program "Education of Gypsy Children", which was initiated in 1997, seeking to expand the opportunities for Gypsy children to have equal access to knowledge. This program was organized in three dissimilar phases, during which different goals were settled (Benekos, 2007).

Also, the evaluation of the supervisory and educational material, which had been utilized up to the specific time, is considered as important. Additionally, the main objectives were the promotion of modernized and upgraded training material in combination with the organization of appropriate training programs, but also the evaluation of Roma bilingualism and *"the production of alternative teaching material in individual learning areas to support teaching in fast-paced welcoming departments or tutoring departments"* (Gotovos, 2004).

The actions promoted under this program are considered significant, because *"children are given opportunities to become aware of their talents, abilities and special inclinations, in order to cultivate them spontaneously and freely in a climate of general acceptance"*. Nevertheless, there is still no properly organized attendance of Gypsy children in the Greek school, and in several cases, it is also interrupted. For this reason, the right assessment of the problem is required, with the ultimate goal of formulating a well-designed policy, that will not be limited only to specialized educational interventions (Benekos, 2007).

2.4 Aim of the research

At the end of the 20th century, various objections were expressed regarding the possibility of ensuring the homogeneous, at a national-cultural level character of the Greek educational system. In particular, the Roma attendance at the Greek school raises concerns, that they are treated in a discriminatory manner, due to the peculiar identity given to them by Greek society. In this context, the high rates of school failure and dropout of Roma population are of particular interest, resulting in the intensification in recent years of the concern and activation of the interest of the educational and social bodies for the upgrade of the education of the Roma.

In particular, it is argued that it is now necessary to utilize intercultural education and its programs to ensure their equal access to knowledge and to prevent cases of school dropout and consequently school failure. Based on these data, this study will investigate the main causes that contribute to the intensification of the phenomenon of school dropout of Roma students.

3. Methodology

By applying the qualitative method, qualitative questions are asked, utilizing the practices of observation or interview, having a small number of participants, and seeking to interpret and evaluate the reactions, perceptions, and tendencies of the participants in the research (Silverman, 2000).

In this research, the basic principles of the quality method were chosen to be utilized, due to the flexible way of its implementation. This is, therefore, a qualitative research that aims to record and study the views and actions of Principals in schools that Roma students attend as well.

3.1 Sample

The aim of the research is to record and study the views of the Directors of schools, in which Roma students also study. In particular, the sample consists of 10 Directors (Primary and Kindergarten) from the prefectures of Viotia, Magnesia, and Xanthi, where there is a strong Roma element. This constituted also the key to selecting the sample.

Of the 10 current School Directors, 6 are females and 4 are males. In addition, 9 out of 10 are teachers and only 1 is a kindergarten teacher. Moreover, two of them also have a degree in sociology and social work.

3.2 Research question

A key feature of Roma education is their school dropout and unequal access to knowledge. Therefore, based on the aim of the research, the research question of this study is the following:

- What are the causes of school dropout of Roma students?

3.3 Research tool

This research effort is addressed to a specific number of teachers, while for its implementation the semi-structured interview will be used, as a tool for data collection (Creswell, 2011).

The interview question is open-ended based on a specific category, based on which the answers were analyzed, aiming at their systematic description and reaching to conclusions.

In this way it is easier to give meaningful and understandable answers, which can be utilized and contribute to the proper utilization of the research, but additionally to the successful answer to the research question, as well as to the realization of the objectives of this research effort (Bryman, 2004).

More specifically, the present study presents and analyzes the results of the category regarding the causes of the intensification of Roma school dropout, which also constitutes the research question.

4. Presentation and analysis of research results

Question: What do you think are the reasons that contribute to the intensification of school dropout of Roma students?

"The constant relocation of families in search of work, the imprisonment of the father or mother due to criminal acts, the negligence of the parents in their effort to ensure the basics for survival, as well as the participation of students in family chores."(1., P.V., 55, m.)

"The distance of the school from the camp and family problems, such as: unemployment, loss or imprisonment of father or mother, the residence of students in a relative, the large number of children in the family, illnesses, as well as frequent relocations due to unemployment."(2., L.O., 52, f.)

"The reasons for the school dropout of Roma students are the constant relocation of their families mainly for professional reasons, which negatively affect the integration of children in the school environment. The absence of school and education from Roma culture. The learning difficulties faced by children feeling that they are not able to cope with the requirements of the textbooks taught in school. The financial difficulties, which force children to work or go out begging. In some cases, it is simply the parents' indifference to send them to school."(3., M.II., 48, f.)

"The reasons vary, some are the following: they do not consider school necessary and do not have it in their priorities. Most of the time family does not support them. They do not think that school will change their lives."(4., K.P., 35, f.)

"One reason is the constant relocation of their parents mainly in search of work. They are usually people wandering around and workers in the fields of "Balamon", as they typically call us. There is also indifference from the older generations regarding school, perhaps because they themselves have not attended school, and so they consider it as unnecessary. Another reason is the marriages of relatives who live far away. When they attend weddings, they miss many days because of the festivities that last a long time. When they return, they usually do not come to school immediately."(5., G.S., 50, m.)

"Many parents find work in other places and take their family with them, without transferring students to another school. Additionally, when parents work, they keep the older children at home to look after the younger ones. In addition, they are not interested in the daily life of their children. If the children wake up on their own in the morning to go to school, it's fine, otherwise it is not a big deal."(6., N.S., 51, f.)

"I believe that their way of life is important to blame, the constant relocations in search of a daily wage, the low standard of living that forces them to work from an early age. In general, the devaluation of the school by the family is intense."(7., A.K. 57, m.)

"The reasons are several and varied, such as: parental indifference, constant relocation, immigration, and not attending kindergarten."(8., V.X., 45, f.)

"Parents who do not encourage their children to attend school regularly. Unfortunately, parents themselves were not "educated" by their own parents to appreciate the value of the school, who in turn grew up in the same way as their parents, creating a vicious circle. Undoubtedly, teachers should also give encouragement and motivation to these children, in order to love school."(9., P.D., 34, f.)

"In my opinion, there are four main reasons that contribute to the school dropout of students. 1^o The indifference, the worthlessness they give to education, to the education of their children. Most parents think that it is not necessary, it is not necessary to educate their children and especially girls. 2^o Their involvement in trade, people wandering and asking for money, forces them not to have a permanent residence, as it requires frequent relocation for long periods of time. 3^o Many difficulties in accessing school in their area or in other schools, due to their living in settlements, away from the city area or lack of means of transportation. 4^o Various customs, cultural elements, prejudices, fears, and habits. These mostly concern girls."(10., E.T., 58, m.)

The analysis of the data shows that all the principals pointed out that school dropout is one of the most important problems, which are called to manage every year. It is worth addressing that the phenomenon of school dropout is strong in the case of school, where students are only Roma, confirming the role of their cultural background. Regarding to reasons for school dropout, most of them have to do with social and stereotypical prejudices, the inadequate Greek education system, the lack of intercultural education of teachers, as well as the degraded family, social, and cultural environment. In particular, in the context of the seasonal nature of the school dropout of Roma, the need for constant movement of their families is pointed out, as a result of which they do not have a permanent place to live, but also the need to work, to contribute to tackling their family problems.

At the same time, the multi-member nature of their families is considered to be an important factor and as a result, it is very difficult to meet the needs of their children, while the parents themselves may drop out of school because they believe that in this way, they protect their children from their cultural assimilation.

The inadequate Greek education system also plays a decisive role in increasing the school dropout rate. As it is pointed out, the modern education system is unable to understand their culture as well as their language.

It was also mentioned that it is of high importance for the teachers themselves to give the necessary motivation to students so that they can display interest in the educational process and their school integration.

5. Conclusion – Recommendations

As pointed out by the school principals who participated in the survey, one of the causes of school dropout is related to the social, cultural, and economic background of the Roma.

In particular, it is attributed to factors related to their lack of educational, emotional, and financial support from their family environment, but also to the peculiarities of their way of life and their social perceptions. The financial poverty of most families, their constant movements, their cultural background, and the view of school as a threat to their cultural identity are causes that need systematic evaluation, in order to remove the obstacles, they pose. From all the above it is clear that their particularities should be studied, understood, and evaluated and based on them to determine the practices that will be applied to their attendance at the Greek school and for the planning and implementation of the corresponding educational process, in order to strengthen their positive attitude towards the school. Additionally, a climate of cooperation with parents must be cultivated, so that their own parents provide them with the essential incentives regarding their successful school integration. According to Brotto (2008), education needs a vision that will inspire people's thinking, move them, and give them wings, in order to make their actions possible. Such a vision necessitates a convincing theoretical basis, but it also ought to address to professionals, motivate them, and support their daily work (Brotto, 2008).

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Maria Papachristou is a graduate of the Department of Primary Education of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (1st Degree), Greece. She also graduated from the Social Policy Department of Panteion University (2nd Degree), Greece. Master's Degree in «Educational Leadership, Management and Emerging Technologies» from Guglielmo Marconi University, Italy (1st Master's Degree). She is now a postgraduate student in the «Social Rights and Advocacy program in the Social Services» of Panteion University (2nd Master's Degree). She is a Primary School Principal. She has attended seminars and trainings related to her subject and has also participated in workshops and conferences.

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