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The Educational Situation Of Roma Children In Albania During The Pandemic, The Role Of Parents

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Abstract

The Roma community in Albania occupies a significant number of the population although since 2011 (CENSUS) there is no other accurate population census data. Awaiting the new CENSUS data, we can estimate that even the official figures we have today are not correct. A problem that has always been identified in relation to this community in Albania has been and remains the education of Roma children, which has been described by various studies as being at very low levels. Despite the efforts made in the last 15 years, this condition has not improved enough to change the educational situation. There have been sporadic efforts, but apparently, the situation continues to be alarming. If we consider in addition the great difficulties that arose from the COVID-19 pandemic, their situation deteriorated. In our study, we want to highlight that one of the main causes of this situation was the role played by the parents of Roma children during the pandemic period. The focus of this study is the parents of Roma children in the Elbasan area and two other components: the role of teachers and the use of technology. Our study raises the hypothesis that the role of Roma parents has been low or nonexistent and that their educational situation has been deteriorating during the Covid-19 pandemic and after. The research questions raised in the study have been answered by the interviews conducted with parents of Roma children in the city of Elbasan and its surroundings. Based on the data collected in the study, we have also given some recommendations, which would help improve the situation in the long term. These recommendations should be considered and adopted in the policies of central and local institutions, beginning with schools, local education offices, municipalities, and the Ministry of Education.

Keywords: Roma children, parenting, responsibility, online teaching, access to teaching

Introduction

The Roma appeared for the first time in a United Nations document in 1977, when the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities through document E/CN4/Sub2/399 recommended to the Commission on Human Rights and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), that the countries in whose territory live Roma (stateless individuals), they must guarantee, if they have not already done so, all the rights enjoyed by the rest of the population (Document E /CN4/Sub2/399, adapted on August 31, 1977, p.47).

Today, the Roma are considered a linguistic minority and enjoy equal rights with the citizens of the countries where they live. This is also expressed in the basic laws of these countries, including Albania (Osmanaj, 2019)

In the territory of Albania, in addition to Albanians, several ethnic groups live, such as Greeks, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Vlachs, Roma, and Egyptians. In the 1989 census, data showed that other ethnic groups represented about 2% of the population (Statistical Yearbook 1990, Tirana 1991). Other independent sources say that these groups in Albania represent about 5%

of the population (Bërxolli, 2005, pp. 19-24). According to the 2011 Census, the total number of the Roma community in the country is 8301 people or 0.30% of the population (INSTAT, 2011).

Although historically the Roma population has been the poorest in Albania, the decline in living standards during the post-communist transition was much faster than for some other population groups. This has given rise to a vicious circle, which perpetuates illiteracy and the low level of education among the Roma, which further deepens their marginalization in society (Osmanaj, 2019).

This situation has continued in the 30 years of the long transition in Albania and it does not seem that any solution has been found to properly address the recommendations of the European Commission. The difficult reality of this population with a focus on children would then be faced with the Covid-19 pandemic that hit the whole world and the most serious consequences would certainly be felt among marginalized groups such as the Roma. This situation would affect all aspects of their life: economic and social, but it would also play a very negative role on students, who even prior to the pandemic faced deep problems related to attendance and the quality of education.

In March 2020 (VKM no. 243, dated 4.03.2020), Albania declared a state of emergency, and the country was placed in quarantine due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This decision brought about the immediate closure of schools, kindergartens, universities, and all life in the country. Faced with such a situation, teaching resumed for all students of the pre-university system in a chaotic situation. The same situation can be said to have been created in the university system, where the knowledge about this form of learning can be said to be greater. According to a report of the World Bank (Western Balkans Regular Economic Report), significant difficulties in the access of students to this type of learning throughout the country were present. It should be emphasized that the digitization of teaching and learning is not only a way of learning, it is a way of thinking. Learning took place through WhatsApp, e-mail, and phones; some non-public schools managed to take advantage of platforms like ZOOM and very few other schools managed to sporadically use platforms like SchoolMe, and Edu4school, which had been part of projects or were being piloted.

Across the country, the number of students in pre-university education was 462,807 (INSTAT). Roma children in the pre-university system in the academic year 2019-2020, according to the data of the Ministry of Education and Sports, were 4862.

Reporting on the progress of the lesson was done by phone and email. There is no exact data on the number of children who had access to this form of teaching from the beginning. It is thought that a significant part of children in rural areas did not have immediate access to this form of learning. Roma children also belong to this category, based on the fact that Roma children even under normal conditions are the ones who are the most uneducated (Osmanaj, 2019).

Parents have been very important partners in this online learning process, who, according to the teachers, but also according to the parents themselves, have helped children to connect through platforms or even to become part of communication groups with schools. So our study raises the hypothesis that Roma parents have not played a role in the process of facilitating their children's relation to this new form of learning, which was primarily based on technology. The purpose of the study is to highlight the role of the family, and parents in the education of their children by analyzing the educational situation of Roma children in Albania during the Covid-19 pandemic. The inactive, sometimes even indifferent role of parents The non-active, sometimes even indifferent role of parents has caused the situation of Roma children in relation to their education to worsen not only in a pandemic situation but also in normal conditions, In the conditions of the pandemic, it is certainly not possible to talk about dropping out of school as a phenomenon that is mostly observed among children of the Roma community, but not being part of virtual classes or not participating in online learning is the same as dropping out of the learning process.

Roma parents are the center of our study because if we refer to the legislation for the Pre-university Education System in the Republic of Albania, in Article 62, On the Rights and Duties of Parents, it is stated that "The parent has the duty that his child regularly attend the educational institution and learn regularly" (Law on Pre-university Education System, No. 69, 21.06.2012). Even in the Family Code, in the chapter on Parental Responsibilities, it is stated

that the child is under the responsibility of the parents until reaching adulthood (Family Code, p. 33).

The education process of children of the Roma community is also problematic for other countries of the European Union, not overlooking the other problem, i.e. the lack of data about the exact number of the population of this community. According to the 2011 Census, the total number of the Roma community is 8301 people, or 0.30% of the population (INSTAT, 2011). From this point of view, this study is focused on the analysis of the problem from the family (parents) and institutional perspective. Therefore, it should be underlined that awareness must be raised among Roma parents who must make efforts and take care of their children's education (Osmanaj, 2019).

In the conditions of a world pandemic and the situations, which must be analyzed for the consequences that they will bring afterward, it was deemed important to analyze the educational situation of Roma children, the gaps created by this form of education, the filling of these gaps as well as parental responsibility that must be analyzed and seen if it has worsened or improved.

Methodology

The method used in this study is qualitative. We have chosen the qualitative method as it is a research strategy that usually places emphasis and importance on words and not on numbers. As a research strategy, it has inductive, constructive, and interpretive approaches (Bryman, p. 374). Since the 70s, Bryman and Burgess have emphasized the difficulty encountered in determining the right strategy in scientific research, emphasizing that this is not at all a simple task, but we have taken into account the 3 main reasons why we chose the qualitative method in our study :

First, qualitative research is sometimes taken to mean an approach to social research in which quantitative data cannot be collected, and this is the case in our study.

Secondly, in order to understand and interpret the dynamics in the target report, we will have an intervention of the separate analysis of each of the sectors, but also the interaction with others. The methods proposed in this study will aim to optimize and facilitate the analysis of the collected information. The instruments that will be used will aim to collect information, which will help us achieve the objectives of this study.

Thirdly, starting from the importance of the fact that social properties are the result of interaction between individuals, we have collected information from the confrontation of thoughts and ideas.

Steps followed in the study

The first step of the study, based on other qualitative research such as that of Foster (1995), was advancing research questions, which we wanted to answer in the study.

The second step is the selection of the relevant site and subject (Bryman, 2016), based on this, we have considered it reasonable to extend our study to the city of Elbasan, more specifically to the peripheral areas where mainly Roma families live.

The third step is data collection. It took us several weeks to conduct interviews with Roma parents, mothers, and fathers, whom we identified and with the help of teachers, considered as reliable representations (Silverman, 1993) in data collection.

The fourth step, data interpretation, was done after we analyzed the theoretical side of the problem and gathered the necessary information to have a clear situation of all the elements and components defined by the structure of our method (Bryman, 2016).

The fifth step is the conceptual and theoretical analysis (Bryman, 2016). It is a step, which is accompanied by the interpretation of the data that then inform the findings of the study. Although there are no new concepts in our study or have not emerged from the research, this phase has helped us tie together some elements of our research. Also at this stage, we specified the research questions more clearly. This is considered an iterative strategy (Foster, 1995) as we have interviewed twice fathers who did not perform correctly in the initial phase.

The sixth step, drawing conclusions as a point where further studies can be deepened to find appropriate methods to fill the gaps caused by the situation of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as to have greater cooperation with parents at all levels of government.

The study focuses on the parents of Roma children in Elbasan. The city of Elbasan was chosen because it is considered one of the 3 cities in Albania with the highest number of the Roma community (Census 2011; Roma Education Fund). In the district of Elbasan, according to data from the Local Education Office, a total of 301 Roma children attend school, of which 292 are in primary education and only 9 of them are in lower secondary education. Also, the number of Roma children attending preschool education is 64. These numbers vary from year to year.

Based on the data provided by the Elbasan Local Education Office, we also selected the parents. Representative sampling allows us to better understand the general situation in Albania. In the "5 Maji" neighborhood, where the "Hamit Mullisi" school is located with a number of 93 Roma students, 20 Roma parents were interviewed, while in the area of the "Emin Matraxhiu" and "Beqir Dardha" neighborhoods, where the "Abdyl Paralloi" school is located with 67 Roma children, 15 Roma parents were interviewed. To understand how the process worked, we included in our study two focus groups with 5 teachers in both schools, in total, the number of people involved in the study amounted to 50.

Considering in addition the problems brought about by the pandemic and online teaching the educational level of Roma children is thought to have further deteriorated along with their interest in school.

The instrument used was the semi-structured interview as a better form for data collection. The focus group interview can encourage more "openness" of the interviewees and provide more genuine and complex information. Drafting a guide is an essential list of issues or topics that are discussed and that the researcher uses as a guide for focus group discussions (Krueger&Morgan, 1998, p. 51). Through it, the interviewees stimulate each other with ideas and thoughts. The focus group provides different data because the participants encourage communication and stimulate ideas about how to think and talk (Morgan, 1998, p. 65). By means of this instrument, it is possible to collect qualitative data. On the other hand, the interviewees facing each other ensures greater reliability.

Results of the study

Even before the pandemic, the problems that accompanied Roma children in education were numerous, such as lack of school supplies, absence from school due to difficult economic conditions, forced child labor due to difficult conditions, etc. What is noticed in this community is the low interest that parents have in education, as they do not consider education as an opportunity to change the lives of their children (Osmanaj, 2019).

Online learning in 9-year education started immediately after the issuance of the Normative Act no. 3, dated 15.03.2020 "On taking special administrative measures during the duration of the infection caused by COVID-19". Most of the interviewed teachers admit that for them it was an unfamiliar process and that at the beginning there were many dilemmas they were faced with. Most of the teachers admitted that at the beginning of the pandemic, they taught lessons via WhatsApp or by phone for those parents who did not have WhatsApp.

The teachers state that they know the Roma community well as they have been working in schools where the number of Roma children is considerable, and they state that they also know their families.

The teachers admit that Roma children, especially in the first phase of the pandemic, were not included in the online learning process and some of the difficulties they have encountered are the lack of contact with their parents, even in the cases where they have had contact with them, there has been no willingness on their part to engage in the online learning process.

Most of the teachers say that almost 90% of Roma children during the pandemic have not been involved in lessons, but on the other hand, they emphasize the negligence of the parents, who refused to talk on the phone. When they talked to the teachers, they mostly asked for food.

The most difficult to communicate with were the fathers, who were also the owners of the telephones. Many times they passed the phone to the mothers and did not answer, saying that they did not understand what the teachers wanted.

Roma mothers, for their part, admit that they were contacted during the Covid-19 pandemic by their children's teachers. It turned out that the teachers had called more than 10 times, but they did not understand what to do.

There were Roma mothers who wanted their children to learn during the pandemic, but the conditions in the family did not allow such a thing, since they only had one phone and it was kept by their fathers. In this regard, the fathers state that they also wanted to, but they did not have the opportunity, because they used the phone to connect with other family members, they used telephone devices whose battery did not last long, they did not have mobile offers to connect to the Internet, etc.

The mothers, who had a telephone, mostly said that they did not have WhatsApp and did not have internet.

The biggest concern during the pandemic for mothers and fathers was not their children's access to school, but health and lack of food. They could not estimate how far their children had fallen behind in their studies because of this situation.

To the question of whether they feel responsible for the educational situation of their children, they do not know how to answer, as they have no hope that their children will manage to change their lives through school or obtain a profession in life. They also admit that they do not stop the children from going to school, but that they are not able to help them with lessons or other needs they have at school.

Regarding the replacement of missed lessons organized by the school, after the children started to return to school, they do not know exactly what the children did at school but they say that they took the children to school as soon as the latter opened even though they were afraid that they could get sick.

When asked what they expect to happen with the educational gaps brought about by the pandemic to their children, they say that their only interest is that the children take the class and start a job. Learning how to write and read suffices for them.

When they were asked if they have computers, tablets, or phones in their families that can be used by children for learning, they say that "we are glad that we have televisions" and almost 100% of parents have never used a computer in their life and the word "platform" is unfamiliar to them.

Regarding their children, they say that their children have never used a computer or tablet, but they know how to use the phone and sometimes better than their parents.

The Internet for them is a way to communicate with relatives who live far away through the camera, but they cannot say how it can be used by their children for educational purposes.

Regarding the TV programs, which were created during the pandemic for students and broadcasted on state television, no one knew about them or had ever heard of them.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study carried out in the city of Elbasan regarding the role of Roma parents in the online learning process during the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted that Roma parents are little or not at all interested in their children's education; their role in this process has not only been unhelpful but sometimes even a hindrance. Although we live in the time of the greatest technological development, they have poor access to technology and also do not create any kind of opportunity for their children to have access to technology. The National Education Strategy 2021-2026 defined "the development of digital competence, through the best use of information and communication technology for teaching and learning" as one of the main objectives. One of the steps taken for this purpose is the introduction of the subject of 'Technology of information and communication' (TIC) in the school's academic plan, starting from the 2022-2023 school year already in the first grade (piloted in 100 schools), but our study showed that Roma students attending lower secondary school did not have good knowledge about technology, there were

even those who had been studying TIC as a subject at school for years, but had never used a computer. The lack of responsibility on the part of the parents, and the lack of school-family cooperation have influenced the growth of the gap that Roma children have with the school.

Roma children have not had access to any online learning platform. The pandemic only deepened their lack of education and made them more distant from the school.

The teachers of Roma children have not had the opportunity to communicate with them during the pandemic period, so checking up on their knowledge has been almost impossible.

Parents have not been supportive in this process and have not had the necessary knowledge and opportunities to do so.

Online learning is not a solution for Roma children, who due to living conditions find it impossible to develop this type of learning.

Based on the results and conclusions of our study, we recommend that urgent measures be taken to identify the number of Roma children who have not had access to online learning.

Measures should be taken and infrastructure conditions should be created for Roma children so that they have more access to technology, as well as identifying those children who do not have knowledge of TIC even though they are of adult age because technology has become an integral part of our life.

Measures should be taken so that the parents of Roma children are made aware of the duties that they as legal guardians have in relation to their children

To organize training for the parents of Roma children so that they too have information about technology.

The Ministry of Education and Sports in cooperation with schools should provide tablets for Roma children and take measures so that they have access to the Internet even after school hours if they do not have the opportunity to have it at home. To raise awareness among Roma parents of the importance of school in their children's lives by forcing them to make it possible for their children to attend school.

Equipping them with the necessary tools, such as computers, tablets, or smartphones can be done in cooperation between the local government and the central government, also seeking the help of non-governmental organizations and businesses in the country.

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