
Roma Students: The Forgotten Victims of the Coronavirus

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ABSTRACT: *The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the daily life of everyone, but for some it has represented an even more considerable challenge. Roma families, particularly those living in socially excluded and marginalised settings, are a case in point. The situation of discrimination experienced for years by Roma families has worsened in times of pandemic, leaving families to feel even more vulnerable and deprived of correct health information. The biggest victims were probably Roma children, many of whom stopped relationships with teachers, school, and classmates and were unable to follow daily lessons through distance learning. The lack of data on the pandemic in relation to this specific target does not allow us to understand its real impact. The only data available for now are those related to single projects of local administrations, NGO and/or volunteer associations. However, it must be noted that the quality and quantity of Roma children's school attendance and performance are often influenced by the educational strategies and teaching models implemented in schools and by the kind of relationship between teachers and family. For this reason, in the post-pandemic school, it will be necessary to reconsider the issue of inclusion through new and improved forms of partnership between schools, teachers and families.*

KEYWORDS: *Roma Students, School, Families, COVID-19, Post-Pandemic School*

Introduction

The social groups most exposed to the consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic and at risk of being forgotten victims of the coronavirus due to their marginalised situation and discrimination prior to the pandemic are the Roma and Sinti populations. The Roma makes up the largest historical-cultural minority in the EU, but also the group which is most subject to inequalities in access to work, education, housing and healthcare. Antigypsyism continuously produces and reproduces negative stereotypes and discriminatory practices that are often institutionally legitimised by policies that exclude or limit access to the rights of citizens (FRA, 2017; Piasere, 2015). Discrimination in relation to the Roma population is reflected and amplified among children and adolescents that grow up in particularly fragile social conditions and

with a very wide range of unmet rights. Among them, the right to education is still a challenge for many countries in Europe. Low education levels, widespread illiteracy among Roma communities together with racism in its various forms, in Italy as in the rest of Europe, are the main obstacles that impact access to the job market, the use of services and active participation in public life. The pre-pandemic data available indicate low rates of enrolment in schools of all levels, high truancy and early-leaver rates, and limited access to services and educational activities outside of school (FRA, 2014).

FRA's Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS II) results, conducted in nine EU Member States in 2016¹, show that Roma children lag behind their non-Roma peers on all education indicators. Only about half (53%) of Roma children between the age of four and the starting age of compulsory primary education participate in early childhood education. The proportion of Roma early school-leavers is disproportionately high compared with the general population. Among the young Roma aged 16–24 who are no longer in education, more than three quarters have completed at most only lower secondary education. Half of the Roma between 6 and 24 years of age do not attend school. Of those who do, only 1 % attend school at a higher level than the one corresponding to their age; 18% attend at an educational level lower than the one corresponding to their age, either because they repeated classes, started school later, or both. This share is highest (20%) among Roma of the age for upper secondary education. The same survey (EU-MIDIS II) shows that the percentage of NEETs, young people neither in employment nor in education or training, is high. Eurostat annually publishes figures on people 15 to 24 years old who are 'neither in employment, nor in education or training'. A similar indicator computed for Roma aged 16 to 24 years shows that the proportion of young Roma not in work or education or further training as their main activity is, on average, 63%. Using it as a crude approximation of the Eurostat NEET rate, the comparison with 12% of the general population of the same age group in the EU-28 illustrates the magnitude of the gap.

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (2017) has stressed that school segregation continues to impact Roma children in Europe. Remedial classes and special schools that provide low-profile lessons and curricula still exist, denying access to the knowledge

¹ EU-MIDIS II – *Transition from education to employment of young Roma in nine EU Member States* (2018) collected information from over 25,500 respondents from different ethnic minority and immigrant backgrounds in all 28 EU Member States. The findings summarized in this paper are based on 7,947 interviews with Roma respondents in Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Spain. The data are representative for Roma living in geographic or administrative units with density of Roma population higher than 10%, who self-identify as 'Roma' or as members of one of the other groups covered by this umbrella term.

usually gained at school and perpetuating educational and social disadvantages that feed into the vicious cycle of poverty and stigmatization. Channelling Roma children to so-called special education often means transforming cultural difference into disability (Casa-Nova, Tagliaventi, 2020).

1. Italian context

Gypsy communities actually living in Italy are characterized by the heterogeneity of groups, dialects and specific linguistic varieties and cultures². There is no official census of the Roma population, and therefore it is very difficult to obtain precise data. The data we can refer to, are approximate estimates from both official sources (Ministry of the Interior), and third sector associations/non-profit organizations. According to Italian Senate (Senato della Repubblica, 2011), there should be approximately 140 000 Roma and Sinti; this figure was also confirmed by some NGOs. Roma, Sinti and Travelers populations represent around 0.2% of the population, one of the lowest in Europe. The Roma communities are characterized by a high percentage of children (60% of the Roma population is believed to be under 18). Overall, there is thought to be around 70 000 children, and if we consider the hypotheses of numerous NGOs, over 40 000 should be in compulsory education (Tagliaventi, 2020).

Having abandoned nomadic lifestyles years ago, Roma and Sinti communities live in many different settings. It is estimated that around 40 000 people currently live in highly precarious conditions in settlements in the outskirts of cities, sadly notorious as «camps». Roma legal settlements were created by local governments under the misconception that the Roma are nomadic people. In Italy, the Roma camps increased in the 1980s and 1990s to respond to the populations coming from former Yugoslavia before and after the war. Initially they were set up as temporary sites, but later became permanent (Bravi, 2020).

As regards legal status, Roma and Sinti with Italian nationality count for approximately half of those in the country. Of the foreign nationals, 50% are from former Yugoslavia and the remainder from Romania, with minority groups from Bulgaria and Poland. Among the Roma population in Italy, there are three categories of subjects with different rights: Italian citizens, European Union member state nationals and non-EU citizens. In addition to these, there are stateless persons and refugees. Although they have foreign nationality, many young people were born and raised in Italy.

² In this text I will use Roma to mean all the communities.

2. Educational inequalities: the role of the school-family relationship

There is a lack of recent data regarding the attendance of Roma and Sinti children and adolescents in Italian schools. The most recent data set comes from 2015 and highlights the low attendance rate in relation to the estimated 40 000 school-age children and adolescents. According to the Report of MIUR and ISMU (2016), in the academic year 2014/15, the total number of Roma pupils was 12 437, with an increase of +780 pupils on the previous year. The Report highlights the increase in enrolments in kindergartens and secondary schools (the highest in the historical series of the last eight years) but also the sharp drop in enrolments recorded in the transition from primary to secondary school. It also confirms the low presence of pupils in secondary schools. In this case the total number of students registered in secondary schools is alarming: only 248 Roma adolescents in whole of Italy. This number does not include students enrolled in vocational training courses.

As it is clear, the gap between 12437 registered students and the 40000 (that should be in compulsory schooling) is so large that it is possible to think that a significant number of Roma children are not registered in schools. Moreover, from school year 2007/08 to 2012/13 the number of registrations at all school levels (preschool, primary school, middle and secondary school) fell progressively. The data available on the school enrolment of Roma children may be underestimated due to methodological problems connected to data collection techniques and the failure of families to declare that they belong to Roma communities in order to protect their children from prejudice and discrimination (MIUR-ISMU, 2016). Another problem to take into consideration is a potential discrepancy between students enrolled in school and those who actually attend school regularly. Generally, though the lack of data certainly doesn't help us understand the phenomenon of truancy, it is also true that the data we do have should be looked at in depth and analyzed.

The education of Roma children in Italy has a long history e this history still influences how Roma families make their children attend school.

It began in 1965 with the ghetto classes 'special classes for gypsies' promoted by the non-profit Organization Opera Nomadi based on an idea of inclusion completely different from the idea we have now. The educational and training proposals were made by the Centre for Gypsy Studies in Rome and in particular by Mirella Karpati who structured a first «gypsy pedagogy» (Bravi, 2013). The experience of the special classes continued officially until 1982 and informally in some schools until later years.

This gypsy pedagogy confirmed the diversity of one social group with respect to the others, and consisted in the exclusion of Roma children from the classroom in order to access a type of teaching of low profile and unable to fill any gap. Many anthropological studies (Piasere, 2010;

Saletti-Salsa, 2008) show that this kind of pedagogy is still applied in some Italian schools, in different ways and forms, but the same in substance. In any case, even though the situation has improved today, this vision of school, experienced by parents or grandparents of current students, which excludes rather than includes, still substrates and mediates the vision of school that many Roma families have today, especially those who have lived in our country for longer.

It is evident that early school leaving and the difficulties to attend the school are caused also by material poverty and housing conditions. Particularly difficult are the conditions of children living in irregular settlements (camps), often far from schools and without transport, place of segregation where there are no adequate spaces to study.

The difficulties increased by the prejudices against the Roma community and also by the lack of correspondence between the purpose of schooling and the expectations of the families. If the education is an investment and a fundamental resource both for the single subjects and for the whole society, it is true that all students (Roma and not Roma) develop diversified motivations and orientations towards the school according to their personal situation, their social, economic and cultural position, and exogenous conditions such as local environment, social opportunities.

As highlighted by Cerrocchi, D'Antone and Vecchia (2015), in Roma communities, educational paths are permanent, mediated by extended family, and take place within everyday experiences that take on greater importance than any other specific content. Childhood does not enter into educational contexts – physical and mental – isolated from the everyday life of adults in the community (all of whom are constantly responsible), which presents models to be imitated. Literacy practices can therefore be experienced as a purely instrumental process, useful for relating to the host community, but hardly conceived of as an educational tool capable of improving one's social status. Moreover, there are relatively few examples of people in the Roma community whose school attendance and educational success have led to social mobility, and school is still a place where children are the target of prejudice and rejection (Piasere, 2010; Saletti-Salsa, 2008). For Roma children this lack of correspondence between academic objectives and motivations, on one side, and individual and family expectations, on the other, makes the families not to encourage the school attendance of the children. It is often a lack of mutual familiarity between school and Roma community, and among teachers and parents, that doesn't support the understatement of the different perspectives.

However, the quality and quantity of Roma school attendance and performance are often influenced by the educational strategies and teaching models implemented in schools and by school organization: whether adopted deliberately or not, models and strategies and organization showed how they can either promote or discourage success and inclusion of Roma children in school. It is often also the

institutional racism that do not help the adequate inclusion of children that come from different contexts, causing disorientation, marginalization and discrimination (Casa-Nova, Tagliaventi 2020). At the same time the kind of relationship between teachers and family influences the reciprocal social representations and the student's school attendance. This is most true in times of pandemic.

3. Data on the COVID-19 pandemic

The discrimination that has gone on for years now increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, making families (especially those still living in irregular settlements) even more vulnerable and lacking proper information on its management. Irregular settlements, which usually are characterized by a state of neglect and poor hygienic living conditions, were at risk of becoming COVID-19 hotspots, and the employment crisis, especially the informal labour market that generates a large part of the income of Roma and Sinti families, have increased the level of poverty and the inability of families to satisfy their primary needs, such as food, heating, medicine and disinfectants. Local administrations haven't always intervened to monitor the situation and provide support. In some cases, in order to protect the health of social work and to grapple with situations of uncertainty, they've instead chosen to suspend the services provided. At least during the first year of the pandemic, the situation was dealt with in some areas by volunteer organizations and third sector associations that enacted forms of charity aimed at satisfying primary needs, but in general many operators stressed the isolation of Roma families and their subsequent distress (Bravi, 2020).

Distance learning has profoundly altered the ability to provide educational continuity for many boys and girls, and has meant that some Roma and Sinti students, especially those living in irregular settlements, have been permanently removed from schooling. Many students were unable to connect to their online lessons due to a lack of digital tools, no internet connection, and also due to the absence of a suitable environment to learn in, having to share very close quarters with their family members. For others, it was impossible because their families, frightened of what was happening, left their usual homes to reach relatives in faraway cities or return to their country of origin.

According to Saraceno (2020), the prolonged closure of schools has highlighted the biggest weakness in the Italian school system: its reliance on families as the main entity responsible for the well-being of students. Families also have had to support the schooling of younger generations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but said support is tied to differences in resources in terms of materials, relationships, housing, language and culture (Vaira, Romito 2020). Even before the pandemic, because some Roma communities mainly communicate via an

exclusively oral language (Romani), the difficulty of learning a language that has a written element has put families in the unfortunate position of not being able to provide the support necessary to their children's schooling, a problem accentuated also by the general absence of Roma children in optional preschool or extra-curricular services.

It will be difficult to obtain reliable data on the impact of the lockdown on the already-low school attendance of Roma and Sinti children. The only data available for now are those related to single projects. They include the National Project for the Inclusion and Integration of Roma, Sinti and Travellers Children, promoted by the Minister of Labour and Social Policies as part of the PON 'Inclusion' 2014-2020 actions, carried out in 14 metropolitan areas in Italy (Bari, Bologna, Catania, Florence, Genoa, Messina, Milan, Naples, Palermo, Reggio Calabria, Rome, Turin and Venice). This project involved 565 children and found that schools lost track of about one in five of them (19%) during the first lockdown (March-April 2020), most likely due to the family having moved. Of the other children, 5% were unable to participate in any form of distance learning, 41% had a very hard time, 28% had a somewhat hard time, and only 5% continued to attend classes remotely without any problems, in the various ways proposed by the teachers³. The data is of course partial, but it is nevertheless of some importance if we consider that it relates to students who are actively monitored by social services, and whose teachers have been trained to pay special attention to the inclusion of Roma children. We can assume that the situation was more problematic for students who aren't part of specific projects, who are not monitored and who don't have the direct support of operators.

A qualitative study conducted by Bravi (2020) on the experience of Roma students in some regular and irregular settlements in small and large cities after the first pandemic revealed a varied panorama. In large metropolises such as Milan and Rome, the lack of specific actions on an institutional level for remote learning was highlighted, partly compensated for by volunteers or third sector activities. Things are better in smaller settlements with fewer than 100 inhabitants and where the relationships between schools and Roma families are stronger because they have been solidified over time, as in Florence and Prato. According to the Kethane movement, which conducted a national survey⁴, the loss of contact with school during the closures of the first wave of the pandemic impacted 80% of students residing in cities with over 150 000 inhabitants and stood at 45% in smaller towns. On top of this very difficult situation, another aspect must be added: prejudice. In September 2020, FRA's Bulletin 5 examined the situation of Roma and Travellers during the first wave of the pandemic and underlined the

³ See *Report di valutazione 2019/20 – fine triennalITÀ. Progetto nazionale per l'inclusione e l'integrazione dei bambini rom, sinti e caminanti – PON Inclusione.* <https://www.progettonazionaleisc.it>

⁴ The survey is available at: https://b10a2541-efba-49cf-a116-8ae061a99526.filesusr.com/ugd/4b6dbc_89e68a23341047e8beaf716a62fc8f6f.pdf

persistent scourge of antigypsyism remained ever present. Media and social networks especially portrayed Roma as a public health hazard and responsible for spreading the virus.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has thus exacerbated discrimination and the generally precarious situation that the Roma population has experienced in Italy over the years, and it has also impacted the right to education of children and adolescents. Distance learning has caused a crisis in integration in schools, which was already unstable before the pandemic, and has further increased drop-out rates. The situation must now be addressed by paying more attention to the most fragile social groups and by strengthening relationships with families. The National Project for the Inclusion and Integration of Roma, Sinti and Travellers Children, promoted by the Minister of Labour and Social Policies (mentioned above), found that before the pandemic, the strengthening of school-family relationships through specific actions (such as the introduction of teachers before the start of school, or having a coffee at the regular or irregular settlements or near the housing units) and direct connections between teachers, ATA staff and parents, improved the attendance rate of Roma children and their knowledge retention and competences.

It is undeniable that there is a gap between schools and Roma families, which is increased by mutual distrust. One fundamental problem remains: all families are asked to enter into a co-responsibility pact, but Roma families are often not considered by the school as an educating family capable of supporting their children. Many relationships are still based on prejudice, and, during the pandemic, many teachers didn't even consider the idea of engaging Roma children with inclusive forms of distance learning also. We have long-term, demanding work to do which requires joint commitment in different areas (school, family, social services and local administrations), but which puts schools at the centre. Schools, in turn, will have to restore their focus on inclusion, which has been undermined by measures implemented to protect public health. Inclusion will accompany the debate on new post-pandemic emergencies, when the consistent in-classroom presence of students (for those who return) will shed light on a knowledge gaps and new forms of social inequality. Moreover, it will be necessary to repair broken relationships and recreate a positive classroom climate to combat disinterest, truancy and isolation.

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