Teachers' Perceptions, Attitudes and Feelings towards Pupils of Roma Origin

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the focus is on schools’ responses to multiculturalism. We present a research project that was designed to explore feelings, perceptions and attitudes of teachers towards pupils of Roma origin in two different Greek schools. Our research strategy involved case studies and in-depth semi-structured interview was our main research technique. The findings suggest that there is a need to rethink and further investigate the issue of who is best suited to teach pupils of Roma origin in Greek schools. We believe that our research could help policy makers, educational administrators and teachers to better understand Roma pupils’ educational needs and plan ways to improve it.

Keywords: Roma, education, school, teachers, Greece

INTRODUCTION

In the Greek language, Roma, Tsigganoi (Gitanes) or Giftoi (Gypsies) are terms interchangeably used to define various social groups, with some common historical, cultural and social characteristics, which reside both in European and other countries (Zachos 2012). Roma people remain one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups among the populations of many countries. The fact that their communities are subjected to discrimination (Bancroft 2001) and racism
(Petrova 2003), could possibly be the axis around which policy makers should organize programs and interventions aiming at their social integration.

In line with human rights and identity politics, over the past thirty years, scholars, students, members of Non-Governmental Organizations and journalists have shed much light upon the condition of Roma people. As a result, there has been much research of Roma groups’ living conditions, economic integration or exclusion, cultural inheritance and education (Zachos 2007). However, there are still serious issues that affect policies regarding the Roma such as: their geographic origins, if there is a Roma nation and who the Roma really are. For this research, the most important issue concerns the Roma identity. Some researchers argue that Roma are wanderers and nomads while others include more settled cohorts (Zachos 2011). This definition is critical for the population that will be included in the various programs, projects and interventions that focus on Roma groups.

This paper focuses on Greece, a country where over a large period of time, Roma groups have been ignored and marginalized. The social and especially the educational integration of Roma groups was included in the agenda of the Government just after the country joined the ex-European Economic Community, at the beginning of the 1980s (Zachos 2006). Since then, the Greek Government supported by European Union funding, has financed several educational projects targeting pupils of Roma origin (Nikolaou 2009, 551). For a further analysis of European Union initiatives for Roma education see Themelis, 2009 and Zachos, 2014). These programs and projects were implemented by Universities, Non-Governmental Organizations, local authorities and the Greek Orthodox Church, and gave rise to many studies that explored Roma origin pupils’ school dropout and performance, as well as the economic, social and cultural factors that contributed to this result (Zachos 2014).

In Greece, as well as in other countries of the European Union, research concerning the role of schools and teachers in Roma pupils’ performance has been scarce. The purpose of our research was to address this gap by exploring Greek teachers’ views on conditions and agents affecting Roma the educational routes of pupils of Roma origin.

We believe that our study could contribute to a better experience of schooling for pupils of Roma origin. Together with other similar efforts, it could prove beneficial to the implementation of more effective interventions and lead in the long run to Roma pupils’ educational and social inclusion. It should be noted that the research underpinning the present study is part of a large-scale project to identify the obstacles that pupils of Roma origin encounter in the Greek formal educational system (Zachos, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2014, Zachos and Panagiotidou 2016).
THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Schools and Roma Pupils

Roma pupils' educational experiences and outcomes are related to economic and social factors such as poverty and social exclusion (Lloyd and McCluskey 2008, 336; UNICEF 2011), communal and cultural patterns (Levinson, 2007, 6), and communication skills (especially linguistic issues) (Kyuchukov 2000, Smith 1997, 247).

The quality of the schools (Woessmann, 2001), and the professionalism of teachers (Darling–Hammond, 2000; Ifanti and Fotopoulou, 2011) are essential features of an educational system that aims at all students’ success. Schools can have a considerable influence on the social and educational inclusion of students of low socioeconomic strata, and this is especially so for Roma children and young people. It can either enhance their success or lead to their exclusion (Cortesao 2011, 258). The degree of schools' readiness to face the challenges deriving from Roma pupils' schooling, depends on several factors:

First: School culture and climate (Lopez 2008) which has the potential to promote learning and mitigate educational inequalities.

Second: School administration. School leaders are those who create an inclusive environment for all pupils, no matter what their social class, "race", ethnicity, gender, abilities and needs are (Zachos and Matziouri 2015).

Third: Non-Roma parents and guardians. When they refuse to send their offspring to study in the same school with pupils of Roma origin (Divani 2001), they contribute to the latter's school exclusion.

Fourth: Teachers. The role teachers play in "diverse" pupils' school performance, is regarded as of major importance (Brooks, Maxcy, and Nguyen 2010, 3, Cummins 1988, 149, Gillborn 1997, 380). As teachers are the “subject” of our research, in the following subchapter we explore the role teachers are playing in Roma pupils’ schooling.

Teachers and Pupils of Roma Origin
Ideology, pedagogy and specific knowledge possessed by teachers upon their pupils’ family environment and living conditions seem to formulate their behavior and expectations. The way educators treat pupils can be of major importance in shaping a bond of trust between children of Roma origin and the school, while it can also have an impact on the pupils’ willingness to participate in school activities (Bhopal 2011, 468).

In line with their pedagogical tools, teachers may choose practices (teaching methods, ways to resolve problems, school discipline) that will be helpful or a hindrance to their pupils’ performance. School practices, often unintentionally and because of lack of proper knowledge, can lead to unfair treatment of pupils of Roma origin (DfES 2003).

Racist teachers can never have any positive influence on children and young people in general and Roma pupils’ school experience in particular. Teachers embracing a racist ideology either ignore children or, alternatively, harass them (Smith 1997, 250) and may "lead" them to drop out of or fail at school.

A second issue arises for teachers who adopt a “color-blind” perspective, namely they believe that different ethnic categories should be eliminated and all pupils should be treated as individuals. Those teachers believe that if they “promote” Roma culture they will enhance their dissimilarity (Bhopal 2011, 476-477). In a similar approach, several teachers refuse to raise the issue of pupils' cultural differences, since they consider it a taboo (Milner 2010, 121). They also maintain that all pupils should be treated equally and thus deny difference (Padfield 2005, 129). But, avoiding and hiding the problem and promoting a feigned picture of an ideally homogeneous society does not solve it. Ignoring social diversity and the reality of social conflict does not help Roma pupils’ school and social integration. Roma people have suffered discrimination and racism for many years, a fact that obliges international organizations and nation-states to make restitution to "heal the wounds". In the end, teachers who fail to recognize the differences arising from pupils' ethnic background, individual needs or socio-economic status, and treat everyone in the same way nurture injustice (Pecek et al. 2008, 226).

On the contrary, teachers who support democracy, social justice and equality, can play a positive role in Roma pupils' schooling. However, this ideological and political affiliation alone, can neither guarantee that the teachers will set high expectations for their students nor that they will create a positive climate, in and out of the classroom.

High expectations and positive climate will be achieved only if teachers are willing to let go of false theories, attitudes, and stereotypes concerning class, "race", ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and ability / disability. Strikingly though, it is
quite often the case that, even teachers who demonstrate positive and approving attitudes towards children of Roma origin, face difficulties in unhooking themselves from stereotypes that keep haunting these children (Trentin et al. 2006, 94). Teachers should reflect critically upon the shaping of their own identities; put an end to the classification of people (pupils) based on their origin, financial status, educational background and diverse cultures; and labelling pupils as "superior" and "inferior", “gifted” or “problematic”. Teachers' everyday practices reproduce expected behavior and the way pupils are supposed to conduct themselves (Lloyd and Norris 1998, 363). It should be underlined that teachers' negative opinions for their pupils are fraught with greater impact in comparison to other (non-teachers) people (Hegedus and Forrai 1999, 174).

Teachers' expectations of pupils of Roma origin are, it seems, quite low (DfES 2003, 4; Karagiorgi et al. 2009, 22). It is worth noting that high expectations are a necessary precondition for school success for pupils of Roma origin (Beremenyi 2011, 359). Low teachers’ expectations can be attributed to a stereotypical assumption that Roma pupils are disadvantaged because of their cultural background (Lloyd et al. 1999). This can lead some teachers to compromise their assessment standards (Pecek, Cuk, and Lesar 2008, 235), which in turn results in following an "education of charity", a practice through which "the needs of their students are dealt with smaller or bigger reductions of the educational good" (Mitakidou, Tressou, and Daniilidou 2009, 65). However, the reduction of teachers' demands from their pupils does not properly enhance students' skills and knowledge and thus weakens pupils of Roma origin’s chances to achieve upward social mobility by means of education. In other cases, lack of confidence to Roma pupils’ educational possibilities may lead to unorthodox practices and inappropriate stances, such as higher teacher absenteeism (Stoica and Wamsiedel 2012) or exclusion of Roma pupils of Roma (Kiddle, 1999).

**METHODOLOGY**

*a. Research Questions*

Our central research question was:

What do teachers who participated in our research believe about the causes of Roma pupils’ educational routes (their school failure / success)?

Our sub-questions were:
How do teachers who participated in our research describe their professional characteristics and to what degree they feel qualified to teach pupils of Roma origin?

How do teachers who participated in our research describe their views concerning the education of Roma origin pupils?

How do teachers who participated in our research describe their views concerning theirs and the schools’ contribution to the educational routes of the pupils of Roma origin.

How do teachers who participated in our research describe their expectations from pupils of Roma origin?

b. Research Strategy and technique(s)

Given that the research aimed to explore, describe, analyze and interpret, a qualitative research strategy was adopted. Qualitative studies may illuminate the complex and often hidden mechanisms of the reproduction of ethnic inequality at the different levels of schooling (Gomolla 2006, 47). Despite the interpretive nature of our research, we tried to locate participants’ views into the current historical, political, economic and cultural context. We conducted a thorough literature review of primary and secondary sources in Greek and English, in order to find similar research and achieve a better understanding of issues concerning the education of the pupils of Roma origin.

A comparative case study design was employed to address the research question and subsidiary questions (Yin 1994, 18, Jensen and Rodgers 2001, 237-239; Bogdan and Biklen 1998, 62) with in-depth case studies of two schools. This strategy allowed the two case studies to be conducted and then compared (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). Our cases were two primary schools situated in the North of Greece.

Case study is a strategy / design that provides a specific direction for research procedures (Creswell 2003, 13). A Case Study does not lead to statistical generalizations and social norms or laws. Case Study Research design is appropriate when the researcher/s’ aim is to provide a detailed picture for a social phenomenon / person /group / organization. Case Study “is an exploration of a “bounded system” or a case, or multiple cases over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Creswell 1998, 61).
We used a variety of data sources in order to gain a better understanding of the issues at stake (Merriam 1988). Our main data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the teachers. In addition, our research questions were investigated in depth through observation, archival research and informal conversations.

Semi-structured interview is based on the research questions, but retains an open, and flexible form. This kind of interview technique allows the interviewees to refer to what they consider relevant and so to reveal their own experiences. They also allow the researcher to guide the interview into issues that appear to be a priority to the subject/s.

A community Case Study, unlike case studies in such phenomena as “mass society” or “bureaucracy”, is grounded in a concrete, identifiable setting (Harper 1992, 141-42). To provide a detailed description of our cases and crosscheck our information (triangulating data), as we have noted, we collected data through observation of schools’ everyday activities (staff meetings, interactions between teachers and pupils, teachers and pupils’ parents); archival research in state and school documents; informal conversations with teachers, parents and local politicians and group discussions with teachers. We analyzed the information we selected before the interviews with the teachers, in order to better understand the conditions under which children of Roma origins are educated and teachers’ work.

c. Settings and participants

Both schools are in Central Macedonia (Greece) and almost all their pupils are of Roma origin. Each school is located on the outskirts of two different cities. The majority of pupils (more than 90%) registered in the two schools of our research (hereafter school A and school B) are of Roma origin. During the last twenty years, there were several pupils of the majority group, who illegally left both school A and school B and enrolled at nearby schools (“white flight” is the term that describes a similar phenomenon: The large-scale migration of white pupils from areas with high rates of African American students in the United States of America).

Our focused group were the “main” teachers in the classroom, meaning teachers responsible for teaching all subjects except for Music, Physical Education, Foreign Languages and, in some cases, Art. “Main” teachers, in contrast to their colleagues who teach the above-mentioned subjects (music, physical education and second language teachers), had the chance to attend retraining modules (one- or two-year). Furthermore, “main” teachers’ professional certification came
from schools of Pedagogy that include modules of intercultural / antiracist education in their curricular.

We selected two groups of teachers from two different Greek schools where most of their pupils were of Roma origin. The first group included teachers from an officially nominated Greek Intercultural School (School A). These teachers were appointed in the School A because of their qualifications (degrees, publications, foreign language proficiencies, teaching experience). The second group included teachers from a mainstream Greek elementary school (School B). Teachers working at school B were not selected because they met some specific criteria which are set by law on intercultural schools, as school B was not nominated intercultural school. They were select according to the criteria applicable to all common Greek public schools.

School A

School A’s building has been recently completed; it is equipped with well-designed functional classrooms, with music classrooms, computer rooms, a gym, a festival hall, staff and principal’s separate offices and a school canteen.

One hundred and seventy (170) pupils of Roma origin were registered in the school for the academic year 2014-5. One hundred and forty (140) of them attended school regularly (without a significant rate of absenteeism). School A has twelve classes. Fourteen “main” teachers staff the school (twelve of them teach in standard classes, one is exclusively occupied in the all-day school (for the role and character of all day schools in Greece, see Thoidis and Chaniotakis, 2015) and one is in charge of the “school Integration Class”). There are also two Physical Education teachers, an IT teacher and a music teacher. Two out of fourteen teachers hold a PhD, one holds a masters degree, and another one holds a retraining diploma (Didaskaleio). Six of them are graduates of the old Pedagogical Academies (institutions that educated future primary school “main” teachers until 1984, but did not grant University status) and, finally, four graduates are from University’s Pedagogical Departments of Primary Education.

School A is named “intercultural” and belongs to that category of schools where their "curriculum adjusts to the special educational, social and cultural needs of its pupils" (Law 2413/1996, Article 34, Paragraph 2).

School B
School B is housed in an old building. Most of the classrooms are relatively small, in size, and there are major heating problems due to unsuitable doors and windows. Furthermore, there were reported operational problems, (insufficient budget for covering the heating bills of the school, during the winter of the academic year 2014-2015). School B is equipped with IT, Art and Physical Education classrooms, a school canteen and a staff office.

One hundred and eighty (180) pupils were registered in School B during the period of our research, one hundred and seventy-one (171) of these students were of Roma origin. It is worth noting that only one hundred and twenty (120) of the students were attending school regularly. School B was not characterized as "intercultural", despite the pupils' composition. Teachers who were appointed in school B were not selected with special criteria, but following the same teacher placement procedures as in any other “mainstream” Greek school. None of the teachers holds a PhD, a masters degree or a retraining diploma (Didaskaleio). Four of them have graduated from Universities’ Pedagogical Departments, whereas the remaining ten are graduates of "Pedagogical Academies".

Information that identifies the teachers who participated in our research or their schools has been withheld in order to meet ethical requirements.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

a. Data Collection and Analysis

The empirical part of our study was conducted during a ten-month period of fieldwork (September 2014 – June 2015). The fieldwork began with observation of both schools. Twenty days were spent in classes and in teachers' and principals' offices, and we also participated in school activities and studied documents on which we compiled detailed field notes. During this period, we gathered and analyzed copious written materials relating to school life (pupils’ record books, book of incoming and outgoing documents, teachers’ association minute book and school boards’ minutes book).

Following this activity in both schools, we returned and conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty (30) individuals: thirteen (13) men and seventeen (17) women (two principals, twenty-two teachers, three physical education teachers, two English-language teachers and one IT teacher). Details of the teacher cohort is set out below.

Table I: Participants Age
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of teachers</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30-35</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>35-40</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-45</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-50</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-55</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II: Participants’ experience of teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previous experience in education</th>
<th>Number of teachers</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>15-20</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>20-25</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>25-30</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III: Participants’ academic background or qualifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree* of:</th>
<th>Number of teachers</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pedagogical Academy (non-university school)</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exomoiosi [Equalization]</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(A process by which diplomas from Pedagogical Academies and University schools of Education are treated as being equivalent, by teachers taking a one-year retraining course in one of the University Schools of Primary Education)

| **Faculty of Pedagogy (School of education)** | 4 | 4 | 8 |
| **Didaskaleio retraining teacher center (A two-year course)** | 1 |

| **2nd / other University degree** | 4 | 4 | 8 |
| **Postgraduate diploma (Master’s degree)** | 3 | 3 |
| **PhD** | 2 | - | 2 |

*Many Greek teachers were appointed to schools holding a Pedagogical Academy degree. Later, these (same) teachers could join a degree equalization (exomoiosi) program or/and a two-year teaching retraining course (Didaskaleio), a master’s degree and a PhD. In other words, a teacher can simultaneously hold a Pedagogical Academy and an Exomoiosi degree, plus a Didaskaleio diploma, a masters degree in Education and a PhD.*

The basic interview questions were wide-ranging, in order to allow teachers to feel free to express their views. We made follow-up questions to elicit depth in responses. Interviews were conducted in schools and lasted between 60 minutes and one and a half hours. Most interviews were recorded, except for four during which we kept detailed notes. We recorded the verbal and nonverbal (such as gestures, coughs) content and created verbatim accounts of the interviews.
To analyze our (qualitative) data, we used “a nonmathematical analytic procedure” (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 18): Thematic Analyses. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative data analysis method for identifying, evaluating, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

We conducted Thematic Analyses on the transcribed interviews to identify recurrent themes within the data. We were committed to remaining faithful to teachers’ own accounts. So, after we thoroughly read and re-read the interview transcripts and repeatedly listened to audio recordings, we adopted “a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions” (Braun and Clarke 2006). We codified the data by hand: We underlined ideas, concepts, key words, and reflections expressed by the teachers and we wrote notes on the texts. In the next phase, we grouped the different codes into potential themes that make meaningful contributions to answering our research questions. Later, we decided if each theme formed a coherent pattern and considered its relation to the data. Finally, we defined the five themes that we present in the following part of the paper. Themes are accompanied by examples of extracts from the transcript we choose as representative of the participants' point of view.

b. Findings and discussion

**Working at a “Roma” school as an option**

Teaching in Schools with low-performing students or in schools that most of its pupils are of different ethnic background is challenging for educators. Especially when it comes to Roma students, many teachers reveal their negative stereotypes:

"I was shocked when I first came here. There were no students in my classroom and a colleague told me that they would come later. They came after nine o clock; their behavior was completely annoying: They were yelling and laughing loud and refused to listen to me. They always spit and curse" B.K. school B.

"The first day I came to work here I left my car outside the school yard. Then, the school principal came. He was furious and asked me to park the car inside the yard, because otherwise it would vanish.” A.M. school A.

Even though there were some differences in the responses (between the A and B school participants) concerning the reasons why the teachers chose to work in these schools, it seems that almost in all cases the strongest motive was that
these schools were located closer to their homes. For some new teachers, schools like school A were their only chance to work in their town of birth. Otherwise, they would have to spend many years probably working in some remote Islands or mountainous areas:

"I used to work in Kasos [a small Greek island]; I came here because I am close to my family (...)" I had no other options”. N.T. school A.

Teachers who work with low-performing students for long periods, are likely to move from disadvantaged to more affluent areas (Boyd et al. 2005) seeking safety, more resources, better professional development, and positive relationships with principals and school leaders (Johnson 2006).

"Working conditions are difficult. But I learn a lot of practices and now I feel that I am a much better teacher. Nevertheless, I wish I worked in a school downtown, but this is not possible (yet)" D.M. school A.

Several teachers choose to remain in these schools either because it is not easy to move and work elsewhere, or because they are satisfied with the working conditions.

"I'd go to work in another school, only if it was located closer to my house. This is not possible yet" N.T. School B

"We have a very good school climate, a nice company of colleagues’ T. T. School A.

According to the interviewees, there are two additional advantages for those teachers who remain in these schools: working where they are not supervised or guided by any education officials (e.g. school principals, school counselors, the Director of education).

"Before the national elections all schools were disrupted by the Greek government plans for teacher evaluation. This issue made me stay in this school for one more year, even though I could go to a school located closer to my house". M.K. School B.

In addition, in these schools there are also no parent-teacher control issues, given the fact that the former seems to have ungrudgingly accepted the educational failure of their children.

"Here at least we avoid intruding parents who tell us what we should and what we shouldn’t do or keep asking us why we teach the way we do, why we prefer the one or the other method etc.” S.M. School A.
Teachers' required qualifications for being appointed in intercultural schools

Teacher quality may have a great impact on pupils' experiences and achievements (Sanders and Rivers 1996). In our opinion, teacher quality has more effect on students from low socioeconomic families, as well as pupils from different cultural backgrounds. So, the way educators understand plurality is a key issue (Brooks, Maxcy, and Nguyen 2010, 3), as their attitude toward "diverse" students is critical to the promotion of equality in educational opportunities (Gillborn 1997, 380).

But experienced and effective teachers prefer to work in schools with high-performing pupils. Schools and classes of lower educational level are staffed with less trained teachers (Oakes 1992). Thus, those schools are even more disadvantage having teachers who often do not know the subjects that they are teaching, counselors who underestimate student potential and place them in lower-level courses and principals who dismiss their concerns (Hayes, Johnston, and King 2009, 262).

Wanting to address this problem, the Greek government gave some schools the chance to select “highly qualified teachers”, no matter their years in the profession (FEK 1592 B' 25-10-2004). We should note here that years in the profession is the main criterion, a teacher should fulfill to move and work to a large city’s “mainstream” school. So, according to the Ministerial Decision 114163/D2/14-10-2004 (FEK 1592 B' 25-10-2004), intercultural schools differ from the "mainstream" schools and as a consequence teachers are appointed in these schools with specific and predetermined criteria according to which, they must:

a) Speak fluently a language (other than Greek) that is the mother-tongue of most of its pupils.

b) Be specialists in issues concerning "teaching Greek as a second language".

c) Hold a PhD or a master’s degree in intercultural education.

d) Hold a PhD or a master’s degree in Sciences of Education.

e) Be experienced in teaching in Intercultural Classes.

f) Speak a foreign language (English, French, German).

g) Have attended seminars on intercultural education organized by the Greek Ministry of Education or some relevant authorized organizations.

When we entered the field, we expected that teachers who work in school A would belong to the above-mentioned category. To our surprise, the majority of
our participants from school A did not have any additional qualifications. Most of them were Pedagogical Academy degree holders (a two-year course of studies), and even those two who had a PhD and a master’s degree, admitted that their research was irrelevant to multicultural education and the specific context of the school.

"I hold a PhD but, to be honest, that phone call I made to a key person was much more helpful for me in order to come here" G.M. school A.

Another unexpected finding of our research was that most of the teachers-participants believed that no further education is required to work with pupils of Roma origin.

"I don't believe some extra qualifications are needed to work in a school like this. We are all teachers and we know what we do". M.M. school B.

We disagree with those teachers’ views. We believe that teachers stand a better chance at creating a caring environment within the classroom when they are equipped with an appropriate pedagogical repertoire of how to deal with student diversity (Lingard et al. 2003). For us, a cornerstone adjustment would be a proper education and training to all those who work and will be appointed to work with pupils of Roma origin.

It is worth noting that nowadays there is a plethora of relevant educational projects and plenty of online or face-to-face courses provided by universities or school organizations that could help teachers to improve their pedagogical background. Nevertheless, these courses may succeed in molding teachers into being open to diversity, but usually fail to inspire them to feel responsible for meaningful multicultural education themselves (Silverman 2010).

"I have worked with colleagues who had extra qualifications and most of them did nothing good for the Roma children. Accepting and loving these pupils is what matters the most". M.C. School B.

On the other side, there is a part of teachers (who held PhDs and master’s degrees) who believe that even experienced, skillful teachers, eager to assist, should be well trained in teaching pupils of Roma origin:

"Further education is necessary if you want to provide a high-quality education to these pupils; they are more vulnerable and they need extra support". A.A. school A.

Roma culture and school
There is a strong argument between teachers who participated in our research that Roma culture is a major obstacle in Roma children's education:

"School and these pupils' experiences are two different things. The Roma have different views regarding religious issues and they do not accept the scientific knowledge we communicate here. This may lead them to question the school's role" A.L. school A

But, is there a (common) Roma culture? And if there is, what are those cultural elements that characterize Roma people?

"Roma love to rest, dance, drink, and enjoy life. They are not the type of people who would wake up to come early in the morning to come to school" S.M. School B.

The dominant perception of Roma identity is that which journalists, politicians, and even scholars adopt (Zachos, 2012). As we have repeatedly stated (Zachos 2007, 2011, 2012, 2014), Romani Studies have largely contributed to stereotyping Roma as marginal groups, the members of which refuse to integrate. So, non-well-educated teachers will underestimate Roma (or any other culturally different group of pupils); they will adopt oversimplified generalizations such as the (supposed) unwillingness of Roma pupils to participate in the schooling process (Divani 2011, 11); they will characterize Roma pupils as "wild, uncontrolled and aggressive" (Levinson and Sparkes 2005) or "unruly troublemakers" (Teasley 2005).

However, knowing your students' culture, history, and traditions is an essential element of a culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010). In our cases, it seems that teachers are not well equipped to work with "Roma culture".

“Here we have the same curriculum, the same books as mainstream Greek schools. It doesn’t help me to achieve better results” M.K. School B

Language, knowledge and skills that schools provide do not have much relevance to many Roma pupils' experiences. Romani culture, history and language are absent from school curricula (Kyuchukov 2000), as well as from the curricular of schools of Pedagogy in Greece, as is the case in many other countries. As a result, teachers: confess that they are unprepared to deal with diversity (Spinthourakis and Katsillis 2003, 94); confirmed their lack of knowledge about Roma history, culture and ways of living (Nikolaou 2009, 553); admit that the way they communicate the content of the curriculum to their pupils is detrimental to those of Roma origin (Cudworth 2008, 368); find themselves failing in classroom management and interpersonal skills and being rejected by pupils of Roma origin (Derrington 2005, 480); taking initiative themselves and voluntarily searching for
information concerning Roma culture (in books, articles, magazines or web resources) (Karagiorgis' et al. 2009).

**School failure and pupils of Roma origin**

A common perception among our research participants is that Roma pupils' family and social environment are responsible for their children's failure.

"They live in an environment where the prevailing role models and lifestyle in general is at odds with the culture that education traditionally promotes" B.K. school B

Mirroring results of various studies (Crozier, Davies and Szymanski K. 2009; Symeou et al. 2009; Claveria and Alonso 2003), our teachers believe that Roma parents are indifferent and do not value highly their children's education.

"(...) indifferent parents. They do not even come once per semester to receive their children' school reports. We only ask parents to send their children to school and we will take care of them afterwards. They do not do even that" A.C. school B

Additionally, curriculum and timetable not being adjusted to the needs and the unique characteristics of Roma children is considered to be a second failure factor by the teachers.

"Common curriculum and textbooks are very difficult for Roma origin pupils. We need to reconsider the school curriculum and the school arrival times."

We believe that in cases where pupils' culture integrated in the school lessons and activities, pupils feel valued and welcomed (Symeou et al. 2009). So, schools should adopt an inclusive curriculum that reflects Roma culture, language and history (Bhopal and Myers 2009, 311). Nonetheless, many schools neither include elements of Roma culture in their curriculum nor provide any relevant resources (O’Hanlon and Holmes 2004). Furthermore, the rigid (school) regulations and the overt or concealed racism that in many cases they are subjected to (Zachos 2012) increase the chances of Roma origin pupils’ school failure. Thus, many schools are not adequately prepared to meet the needs of Roma pupils (Miskovic 2009).

Very few participants mentioned the teachers' role and responsibilities, while one cited hereditary factors.

*How do teachers view their own role in Roma education?*
Teachers from both schools believe they can't do much for the academic success of the Roma children, because the experiences of these pupils diverge from those of the other Greek pupils, making it difficult for them to relate to the curriculum and appreciate the schooling experience.

"A nine-year-old student once told me: Why should I become a teacher like you? To get paid just "three hundred and sixty euros "? I'm going to sell "stuff". I can earn your monthly income in a single day." K.M. school A.

"Teachers ought to play games, sing, dance and play theater with pupils of Roma origin. We have neither the authorization, nor the knowledge to do so. We mostly base our efforts on our instinctive than our scientific knowledge" B.T. School B.

Few teachers are confident that they can do things that will affect the fate of their pupils:

"You can avoid children dropping-out from schools when you teach things that matter to them. Even though I made a suggestion to our colleagues that could reduce school dropout, I did not find any positive response. This is not only a matter of senior school leadership. Colleagues should take actions that will attract the "other" children as well. I use the term "other" children because non-Roma pupils' parents in our area find ways to register their children in other -than our- schools, even though we have good quality building facilities." P.T. school A.

As it concerns the teachers' characteristics in order to have the best result for Roma pupils, only four teachers from both schools dared question the inappropriately established norms.

"Is by any chance possible for me to work in this school and violently insult the students and their tribe on daily basis? Why then do I keep staying in this school? Because it is within my comfort zone and I feel at ease" T.T. school B.

"It is us, the teachers, who should approach pupils' way of life in order to gain their respect and appreciation" S.K. school A.

**Conclusions**

Our research, which focused on teachers working with pupils of Roma origin, aimed at the improvement of the quality of these pupils' education. We tried to connect everyday schooling experiences with economic and social factors. Poor schooling (for all pupils including those of Roma origin) is a reality that needs to change. We believe that our findings are important for a better education policy for Roma groups. As shown by the data, the legislative acts that regulate the teachers’ appointment in schools with Roma origin pupils have not been
particularly successful in meeting their ends. The perceptions, attitudes and feelings of teachers staffing the two schools of our research towards Roma origin pupils are not characterized by major differences. Most of them attribute the Roma pupils’ school failure to their background (culture, family, community and especially language). Teachers who contributed to our research fail to recognize the contribution of society and the educational system to Roma marginalization and social exclusion. Although most of them put the school failure of Roma origin pupils down to the inflexible school curriculum, only a few believe that teachers can have a substantial role in Roma pupils’ success.

A striking finding from our research is that only a few teachers with “special qualifications” seem to work in the Intercultural School (A). It seems that procedures and preconditions for teacher recruitment in Intercultural Schools did not actually bring teachers with higher qualifications to these schools. Thus, the procedures regarding the appointment of teachers in intercultural schools should be revised. Teachers who exclusively blame pupils of Roma origin and their cultural characteristics (Trentin et al. 2006) for their educational experiences and outcomes; do not show any willingness to know Roma pupils’ living conditions; do not intend to differentiate their instructional and discipline practices; feel poorly prepared to teach pupils of Roma origin would be better working in another school. Schools with a high percentage of Roma pupils should be staffed with teachers who have the required experience and certified training in multicultural issues. Most likely to succeed are those teachers who demonstrate a strong will to support the educational progress of Roma children, have high expectations for each pupil, provide Roma students with additional incentives, modify the curriculum and adjust their teaching to the children’s culture and local community history. Under the current condition of prolonged economic crisis, teachers should be determined to strive for achieving their goals, by going the extra mile and even dedicating part of their personal free time to their work. Only then will teachers be able to reconsider instructional practices and introduce radical techniques upon the core obstacles they are dealing with. It is the only possible way teachers can escape the “resting routines” trap, which is nothing but the annual repetition of the same process, regardless of their class composition (Cortesao 2011, 264-5).

We should underline here that teachers are just but one of the factors that contribute to the pupils’ failure or success. "State education departments and other educational institutions, communities and social norms interact to produce school success or school failure" (Nieto 2000, 44). Exclusively blaming the teachers and treating them as "scapegoats" is a mistake. Teachers' class, ethnic and cultural origin, as well as the institutions that educate them, play a crucial role in shaping their teaching strategies and practices.
We believe that our research has the potential to contribute to the establishment of policies targeting the improvement of the education that pupils of Roma origin receive. A different and more effective policy would be one that could encourage Roma groups’ social integration initiatives (working, housing, medical conditions), revisit and adjust the school curriculum, promote cooperation of school – parents – local communities, and, provide teachers with the kind of education and training necessary to understand and deal with issues in multicultural classrooms, in order to focus on and meet the real needs of Roma pupils.

References


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1 An earlier version of the ideas and research of this paper was first presented by the author in the World’s Communication Association International Conference «Connecting Global Matters: Culture, Education and Geopolitics» (2015, Lisbon August).