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Abstract

The role of school principals is recognized as crucial for the daily operation of schools in general and specifically for the management of the challenges posed by the increasing diversity of the current era. In this article, kindergarten principals' views regarding policies and practices for the management of diversity with reference to one of the most marginalized group, the Roma people, are examined. For this purpose, ten semi-structured interviews with kindergarten principals in areas in which Roma people live either in settlements or inside the residential areas were conducted. Data analysis indicates that principals are aware of the inadequacies of the policies regarding the Roma people and they propose a series of measures at local and central level for the improvement of the school inclusion of Roma children. However, principals are also trapped to a deficit discourse that transfers to the Roma people the major responsibility for their social and educational exclusion.

Keywords: intercultural education, school principals, inclusive policies, Roma people.

Opiniones de Directores de Centros Escolares sobre Políticas y Prácticas para la Inclusión Educativa de los Romaníes

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Resumen

El papel de los directores de escuela es tenido por crucial para el funcionamiento diario de los centros de enseñanza y, en especial, para la gestión de los retos que plantea la creciente diversidad de nuestra época. En este artículo se exponen y analizan opiniones de directores de guardería con respecto a políticas y prácticas para la gestión de la diversidad con relación a uno de los grupos más marginados: el pueblo romaní. Para dicho propósito, fueron realizadas diez entrevistas semi-estructuradas a directores de guarderías ubicadas en enclaves donde reside población romaní, ya sea en asentamientos apartados o en zonas urbanas. El análisis de los datos pone de manifiesto que los directores son conscientes de las deficiencias de las políticas con respecto a los romaníes, por lo que proponen una serie de medidas a nivel local y central para mejorar la inclusión escolar de dichos niños. Asimismo, los directores se sienten atrapados en un discurso deficiente que transmite a los romaníes la mayor parte de responsabilidad en su exclusión social y educativa.

Palabras clave: educación intercultural, directores de escuela, inclusión educativa, romaníes

Diversity concerns governments, policy makers, educational institutions, other interested bodies and the public at large as well, especially under certain circumstances, such as the revival of the “Muslim threat” the last two decades (May, 2009), or the more recent refugee crisis. The “others” in general, appear to threaten the secure environment of everyday life and question the assumptions of the dominant group (Bauman, 1997). Issues of culture, nation-state or identity have to be renegotiated under the light of the condition of multiculturalism. Although the production of values and meanings is no longer subject to local restrictions (Bauman, 2004), and part of the knowledge is constructed and reproduced through the mass media or the internet, school still remains the main legitimate institutional agent in charge of this role. Thus, after World War II, western states elaborate various education policies in order to handle with diversity, while European bodies, such as the Council of Europe start gradually to intervene in the formation of common principles in the education of ethno-culturally diverse groups (Nikolaou, 2008).

The new multicultural discourse challenged the nationalistic orientation of Western education. Multicultural education is a reform movement that promotes equal opportunities for all and strives to reduce prejudice and discrimination against oppressed groups. It is not limited to curricular changes, but it also involves changes in the total school system (Banks, 2010). However, most European countries implemented for a long time policies for the assimilation or integration of the “inferior others”, perceived as bearers of a defective identity that should be rectified through education (Govaris, 2004; Nikolaou, 2011). After the Maastricht Treaty, there is a turn in European policy, in terms of the priorities set forth, as the fight against school failure and social exclusion, the protection of minority and mother languages, the development of intercultural teachers’ training, intercultural dialogue and education for democracy, human rights and citizenship are at the top of European agenda. These efforts are supported by European funding of a large number of relevant educational intervention programs (Nikolaou, 2008), although the last years multiculturalism seems to be perceived again as a threat (Parthenis & Fragoulis, 2016).

In this paper, we attempt to explore principals’ views on policies and practices for the educational inclusion of another vulnerable group, the Roma people in the Greek context. It is argued that because of the imperative need

for the Greek state to respond to the new conditions of diversity established initially by the arrival of repatriated people and in the early 90s by the immigration flows mainly from Albania, the “forgotten” of the Greek educational system (and society), that is, the Roma people and the Muslim minority were also came to the fore (Nikolaou 2008). Thus, the introduction of intercultural education in Greece and the gradual introduction of compensatory policies such as reception classes or Education Action Zones, initially aiming mostly at the management of the consequences of the immigration flows, also benefited other vulnerable groups.

Social and Educational Exclusion of Roma People and Possibilities of Change

Roma are a heterogeneous minority group dispersed across the world with no historical homeland. Although it is hard to make accurate estimations, nowadays the Roma population is about 10 million located mainly in Central and Eastern Europe, with most living in poverty and residential isolation. In most places they resided, they were persecuted and faced with discrimination (McGarry, 2010; Widmann, 2007). Although Roma people lack of a strong collective political representation, over the last thirty years they have drawn the attention of international and European organizations, while various agents, such as universities, research institutes, NGOs and local authorities were actively involved in actions for combating social and educational exclusion of Roma people (Zachos, 2019).

In 1989, a new European policy regarding the education of Roma people was promoted, affecting national policies. The Ministers of Education of the European Union adopted a Resolution on school provision for Gypsy and Travelers’ children, aiming to promote a set of measures for overcoming the major obstacles to school access (Council of the European Union, 1989). A few years later, European Commission (1996) reporting on the implementation of 1989 Resolution, stresses out that lack of schooling for Roma people is a serious handicap for economic, social and psychological reasons. Illustrating the economic reasons, European Commission (1996) argues “for Gypsies and Travelers, schooling is synonymous with autonomy and providing them with it will ensure significant savings for the public purse. The cost of adapted school provision is far less than the expense of providing

social assistance, which Gypsies and Travelers by and large reject”. However, European bodies recognized that their policies largely failed (Council of the European Union 2009; European Commission 2015) and the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 was introduced in order to fight the social and educational exclusion of Roma people. Accordingly, member states, including Greece, adopted National Roma Integration Strategies.

In Greece, the Roma population is reported to be at least 150,000 (Moraitou, 2013), while the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI, 2015) raises this number to 265,000. Act 2413/1996, despite its inadequacies, introduced for the first time intercultural education in Greece, while EU funding since 1997 has made feasible for the universities to design and implement large intervention programs under the state supervision for the promotion of social and educational inclusion of vulnerable groups, that is, the Roma children, immigrants and the Muslim minority of Thrace. At that time, access to the education system and the provisions of the welfare state for Roma people was very limited and despite their long presence in Greek territories, they were not granted civil rights until the 70s (Parthenis & Fragoulis, 2016a). The education of Roma children was a minor issue within the Greek policy discourse until very recently. Indicatively, in the circular Γ1/206/14-4-1987 of the Ministry of Education (1987) regarding “The Education of Gypsies’ Children”, the state admits that most Roma children never attend primary school, although school attendance is compulsory at this grade.

In the years to come, the Ministry of Education issued several circulars regarding the education of Roma children, promoting in-service training and reception classes or introducing the “study cards”, allowing Roma children to change school more easily during the school year in order to follow their parents when relocating for professional reasons. The outcomes of most state interventions were relatively poor, as the long marginalization and social exclusion of Roma people and the distrust between the Roma and the non-Roma communities were deeply rooted. Thus, universities took over a part of the responsibility for designing and implementing interventions for combating social and educational exclusion, achieving to largely improve the attendance rates of Roma children. However, the recurrent interruptions in the implementation of university programs due to the lack of regular funding and

the inadequate state support, continue to threaten the long-term effectiveness of these interventions. Educational inclusion goes hand in hand with social inclusion and, as so far most Roma still live on the margins, in ghettos and shacks usually outside the residential zones, without legal access to running water or electricity (Parthenis & Fragoulis 2016a).

Thus, the issue of equality of opportunity, which is central in western democracies, tends to be forgotten for the Roma people (Parthenis & Fragoulis 2019). Roma children are largely perceived as a problem for schools, a view justified by an endless list of the difficulties they face making school inclusion almost infeasible, such as poverty, inadequate housing and living conditions, prejudices, devalued mother language, biased school assessments and others. Simultaneously, a negative identity of Roma people is constructed and perpetuated, impeding even the research community from focusing on elaborating policy and educational suggestions for removing barriers for Roma students (Hemelseoet, 2015). It is often ignored that traditional Roma education is a community based education, in which Roma children are introduced to adults' communication code at a very early age, as early they participate in day-to-day community's activities. During this process of early socialization, Roma children learn the social, linguistic, cultural and moral codes of their community, which are often in contrast with what the official school expects from them, experiencing thus educational marginalization. The involvement of Roma parents in the educational process and the presence of Roma assistant teachers in classrooms along with better in service training with an intercultural orientation for regular teachers could facilitate the inclusion process in a competitive, full of rules school context (Kyuchukov 2000).

Taking into account the central role of mother's education in students' school career, some research focuses on the potential of Roma women involvement in their children education. This is a case of particular interest, as Roma women are considered to be at the crossroads of various systemic inequalities, with direct consequences for their lives (Sime, Fassetta & McClung, 2017). Women are often seen as oppressed by their own patriarchal communities, being discouraged from engaging in education or employment in order to focus on early marriage and motherhood. Consequently, Roma women perspective is also trapped into a closed, mainly kinship based system of relationships, with few opportunities for networking outside their

community, even more when they face additionally language barriers (Sime, Fassetta & McClung, 2017). Thus, an important condition for achieving Roma women active involvement in education is their empowerment in order to become agents of transformation. To this extent, Aiello et al (2019) explore how enlarged Roma women organizations can function as vehicles of social change for the benefit of their communities, as well as for the society at large. One aspect presented in this research is the power of positive role models of Roma women that received higher education degrees and how they inspired other young Roma girls during the Roma women student gatherings to set goals and pursue their accomplishment. As Munte-Pascual et al (2020) argue, the support of some Roma families to their daughters for studying in higher education and the feeling of empowerment among Roma girls that managed to accomplish their studies and overturn stereotypical images, prepare the ground for greater gender equality within the Roma community.

The Role of Principals in Promoting School Inclusion

Principal's role is very important for the management of multicultural schools, the development of actions to combat racism and the establishment of high-quality education that serves all students (Gillborn 1995; Ryan 2003), although it is recognized that they have to respond to greater demands with fewer resources (Theoharis & Brooks, 2012). School as institution focuses on the "center", meaning the students who achieve well and enjoy family support. Simultaneously, many students either drop out because they cannot follow school norms, routines and rules, or they are exposed to compensatory educational structures and policies. Education policy and school should pay attention especially to the "diverse" school population, which differs in terms of culture, language, ethnicity, religion, physical ability or sex orientation that have no parental support and voice in school life. Principals' responsibility is to facilitate the development of the school and the local community capacity to respond to diversity (Burrello et al., 2001).

Principals have no direct effect on student achievement, in the same way teachers and parents have. However, they have indirect effects through the actions they take and their efforts to influence teachers and parents who are directly involved in everyday student life and to shape the necessary learning environment for all students (Crum et al., 2010). The recognition of the

significance of principals' role has led to a large research production regarding the concept of management and the transition to the new concept of leadership. Actually, this is the “golden age” of school leadership (Leithwood & Day 2007, p. 1), in which various models of leadership that apply different strategies for achieving the goals set have been developed (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach 1999; Bush 2008).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to focus on leadership models. Irrespective of the criticism on leadership, perceived sometimes as a new tool for the imposition of neoliberal principles in school, such as the call for quality, effectiveness or accountability (see Ward et al., 2015), the need for culturally competent principals that address the needs of all students is widely accepted. School leaders should value diversity, create an inclusive environment and develop strategies for the effective management of differences or conflicts that may arise in a multicultural context (Smith, 2005). An important dimension for the establishment of an inclusive school environment is the involvement and the establishment of relationships of mutual trust and respect with parents and the local community. Parents should feel that they are important partners in school life of their children and that their “diversity” is source of enrichment of the learning process and not a means of legitimization of school failure. Thus, culturally competent principals or leaders should incorporate all parents' views in decisions concerning the school and their children and try to actively engage the local community in addressing issues of diversity, exclusion or racism (Smith 2005).

Greek educational system has a long centralized tradition, in which the role of school principals until the 90s at least, was limited in handling administrative/ bureaucratic issues according to the legal framework. Taking into account the limitations of the Greek context, principals had until very recently limited room to act as leaders and to take initiatives in shaping an inclusive school environment (Andreou & Papakonstinou, 2004; Koutouzis 2012). Compliance with the directives of the Ministry of Education is a major part of principals' everyday practice, while major education policy decisions regarding the goals set, the curriculum, the school routine, or funding are made centrally (Geraki, 2014). During the last two decades, some steps for ensuring greater autonomy to the school unit have been made, although the centralized structure of the education system is still present. Nowadays, school principals

can intervene more effectively than in the past in areas such as the introduction of innovative practices or Information and Communications Technologies, the encouragement of teachers' professional development, the undertaking of actions for combating discrimination and racism. Principals can set goals and processes for achieving these goals, taking into account the limitations of the central policy (Koutouzis, 2012).

Obviously, principals need time and training to meet the demands of such a role, as they are not only expected to fulfil their administrative tasks, but also to positively influence the learning process and the cooperation of all the involved parts of the school community. Leadership, after all, is a process of influencing the actions of others, although the crucial issue is in what direction wish to alter school and education in general (Bush, 2008). The importance of engaging families and communities in the school, the classroom and generally in the learning process for tackling educational inequalities is well documented, especially regarding vulnerable groups such as the Roma people (Flecha & Soler, 2013). To this extent, various practices and fields of collaboration and partnership among school, parents and communities have been suggested (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). However, literature indicates that many factors result in low involvement of socio-economically disadvantaged parents and those of low command of the dominant language, such as: implicit school norms that discourage parental involvement, teachers' beliefs and expectations that these parents lack skills, abilities and interest to assist their children in school and that they do not wish to be actively involved in their children's education, and, respectively, parents' perception of school staff not informing them of their children's education and not wanting their collaboration. The role of school principals is considered as crucial in fostering parental involvement, provided they embrace behaviors and practices that will form the appropriate school environment (Griffith, 2001).

Method

The aim of this paper is to explore principals' views on the following topics:

- a) The causes of early school-leaving of Roma children.
- b) The attitudes of Roma parents towards pre-school education.
- c) The relationships between Roma and non-Roma children and parents.
- d) The role of kindergarten teachers regarding the school inclusion of

Roma children.

e) Policies and practices for promoting school inclusion of Roma children.

In order to explore the research questions, we conducted ten semi-structured (10) interviews with kindergarten principals. The sampling is purposive (Cohen et al, 2005). In particular, they participated:

- Six principals from kindergartens located in the Western suburbs of Athens. From this part of the sample, four kindergartens are located in an area in which Roma people are relatively well included in the local society (Principals A, B, C and D), while two kindergartens are located in an area with low inclusion of Roma people (Principals E and F).

- Two principals from kindergartens located in the Eastern suburbs of Athens with a low inclusion of Roma people (principals G and H).

- Two principals from kindergartens located in the richer North suburbs of Athens with an also low inclusion of Roma people, although Roma settlements are inside the residential zone (principals I and K).

Interviews were conducted during the period of July-September 2017. Firstly, researchers contacted the sampled principals by phone seeking for their consent to participate in the research and informed them about the purposes of the research, the anonymity of the records, and the possibility of being provided with a copy of the findings (Neuman, 2014). After that, the interviewers contacted again the principals to arrange interviews. All interviews were conducted inside the schools in time convenient for the principals and each one lasted between 30-40 minutes. Interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the principals. The interviewers could modify the sequence of questions, change the wording, explain or add to them. Prompts and probes were also used. The response mode was unstructured, allowing the participants to express freely how they regarded situations from their own point of view (Cohen et al., 2005).

Thematic analysis was used in data analysis. Interviews were transcribed and the extracts connected with the research questions were located. Then, an initial coding of data was made in order to describe their content. Codes were then reviewed in order to identify common patterns of meanings, topics and ideas within data. Finally themes were identified and named (Tsiolis, 2018).

Results

Causes of Early School-Leaving of Roma Children.

Principals' views about the causes of early school-leaving of Roma children could be summed up in two broader categories closely interrelated: The anti-school culture of Roma people and the lack of family support.

The anti-school culture of Roma people. The anti-school culture of Roma families (Parthenis & Fragoulis, 2016a; Zachos, 2012) appears to be the main reason for school dropout. It is argued that Roma children prefer to socialize amongst themselves (principal G), or that Roma parents do not prepare their children for the school environment “they are used to live outside, so they feel that indoor spaces with limited room are confining” (principal H). Principal G when asked about the most important long-lasting obstacles in the educational and social inclusion of Roma children, attributes the whole responsibility to Roma “their hard financial situation...their way of life...their mentality, their culture...they get married at a young age...”. Similarly, “Many Roma believe that school is useless...they have stereotypes...they are afraid that we will learn their language...they give us different names...they want to safeguard their culture...”(Principal E); “Everything I’m trying to build here in the morning, rules, behavior, it’s all demolished at home by evening...the main obstacle is their culture, they cannot follow rules...”(principal A); “They cannot follow a schedule...they don’t have boundaries or rules...when there is a wedding or a celebration, children go to sleep late...if the weather is a little cold or rainy, they don’t come to school”(Principal D).

Principal B argues similarly, but she adds that some children have changed and they are better integrated into the school community. It is worth noting that it is considered as an advantage for the Roma children to not look different from the non-Roma. Principal C also stresses that

they are quite unruly, it’s not easy for them to follow a schedule...they find it difficult to wake up in the morning, because they go to sleep late at night...they do not put “must do things” in their lives...they only do what they want to do.

However, she adds “There are also prejudices...sometimes we may be

unfair towards them...even if they want to be included, we don't help them when we doubt them". Principals I and K also focus on the Roma inability to accept the school framework which is full of rules and therefore at odds with the way they are brought up. Moreover, some principals (F and A) state that Roma parents believe that kindergarten is unimportant. Thus, Roma cultural characteristics are seen either as barriers toward the provision of public services or an excuse to allow Roma to exclude themselves from education (Lloyd & McCluskey, 2008).

The lack of family support. The role of family in educational success and the differences in parents' ability to support their children to develop the "appropriate" attitudes towards schooling are well documented. Parents' socio-cultural and ethnic origin, level of education or economic ability is amongst the decisive factors that affect parents-school relationship and school success in general (Kim & Sheridan, 2015; Hill & Craft, 2003; Lareau, 1987). Principals transfer the responsibility on the Roma parents' side, ignoring schools' responsibility. Thus, other reasons mentioned for the high dropout rates of Roma children are the frequent moves of their families for professional reasons (Principals A, B, C, D, E, G, H), and the lack of family support and stimuli, like for example practice with early reading activities at home (principal H). According to Principal A, lack of family support results in Roma children being unable to keep up with the rest of the children. As principal D states "children come to school, but they are stressed, they don't have stimuli...at school they attend for the first time a theatre performance...". Some principals (E, G, H) argue for a language barrier, noting that Roma children grow up within a context of a non-literate culture (Zachos, 2019). Principals C and F emphasize the financial distress of many Roma families "...they cannot afford or they are not interested in buying clothes, shoes or other basic goods for their children...".

Another approach of Roma children's dropout rates is that "Roma children do not want to leave their home (to attend school)... perhaps they are afraid of being abandoned" (Principal E). Furthermore, principal D argues that Roma children, especially in her area, have a predetermined professional future "children whose parents keep stores take it for granted that they will take over their father's business when they grow up. They believe that their future is secured." It is noted that often for the Roma people there is no direct link between success at school and socio-economic success and therefore it is not

considered an incentive for pursuing a long educational career (Vasiliadou & Pavli-Korre 2011).

Principals' Views on the Attitude of Roma Parents towards Pre-School Education.

Parents' attitudes toward pre-school education are very important in fostering school attendance of their children. However, for Roma people, school is an institution which holds a central role in a society perceived as threatening. School, in its current structure, rejects Roma children, their appearance, language, culture, skills and experiences (Vasiliadou & Pavli-Korre 2011, 23-27).

The limited participation of Roma parents in kindergarten's life.

Parents-teachers meetings are an established practice of involving parents, as research indicates that they have an impact on both parents-teachers relationships and students' progress (Hornby, 2011, 82). Some principals state that Roma parents' indifference towards kindergarten is changing and many of them express more positive views about its importance. However, they also argue that even when Roma parents have a positive attitude towards kindergarten, they tend to have limited contact and cooperation with the school during the school year. Thus, Roma parents visit kindergarten mostly for attending school events and celebrations, while Principals I and K claim that Roma parents rarely visit school or participate in parent-teachers conferences (PTC). Only principals B and D mention that several Roma parents participate regularly in PTC. On the other hand, other principals (A, C and H) argue that situation is similar to the past and Roma parents underestimate schooling in general and even more kindergarten.

The “problem” of Roma culture...again. As emerged in the first axis, most principals believe that Roma culture is part of the problem or the main reason of school dropout/ irregular attendance. Thus, principals were asked directly whether they consider Roma culture as an impediment for their school progress. Principals insisted on their views, revealing the strong stereotypical image of Roma communities. Life without rules is a recurring motif in principals' narrative:

They don't have rules in their life. They may be going to bed late at night and that's why they don't come to school as early as they

should...they don't have the rules that non-Roma abide by one way or the other (principal A)

“Inconsistency is their primary problem, as well as their inability to adjust to a schedule, to rules” (principal C). Principal B and D argue similarly, while principal D adds other aspects “children with earrings, boys with highlights in their hair...”, “bad nutrition...they always bring croissant...rarely will you see a Roma bake a cake or make a sandwich” (Parthenis & Fragoulis, 2016a).

Similar perceptions were also expressed by principal H in the first axis, as well as by other principals “all their life takes place outside their shack...they eat a lot of take-away food...they don't share habits that everybody else has, like attend an event, go to the theatre, take their children to the playground...they have not developed social skills...” (Principal I); “I believe it is also a matter of education, which is not part of their experience...they cannot pursue something better for their children. Some may achieve that. They may want it, but I don't know how feasible it is”, “They do not have a sense of responsibility, some parents are very young and immature, parenthood happens to them at a very young age...they don't remember their children's date of birth, it's terrible” (Principal K). Only principals F and G argue that Roma culture does not impede schooling. However, principal G argued elsewhere that one of the most important obstacles for Roma children is their culture.

Relations between Roma and Non-Roma Children and Parents

Data analysis reveals the limited interaction between Roma and non-Roma children and parents, as well as stances of discrimination against the Roma people.

The multiple facets of discrimination against the Roma. In kindergarten, there is an emphasis in developing social competencies (sharing, turn taking and getting along with others), and academic competencies, such as paying attention and staying on task (Hill & Craft, 2003). However, many Roma children do not meet the expected standards and they are marginalized. Initially, only two principals mentioned that they have observed incidents of discrimination against Roma children in their schools “Children can be very cruel...they may call you a Gypsy and tell you ‘I don't want to play with

you...” (Principal E); “Roma are the usual suspects...at home they learn things that are not appropriate for 5-year-old children...they say words that are not fitting to their age...and we have to explain these words to all children...” (Principal A). However, during the interviewing, most principals reveal the long-lasting obstacle in the educational inclusion of Roma people. In some kindergartens, Roma children do not socialize with non-Roma children, unless there are not enough Roma children to play with (Principals C, E, I and K). Principal I notes that only once met a Roma child in parties of non-Roma children. Similarly, non-Roma parents “rarely accept their children being friends with Roma children...they don’t invite them to their parties” (Principal C). Principal D maintains that Roma and non-Roma children socialize and play together and claims that non-Roma children invite Roma children in their parties, but there are still problems for which Roma children are considered as responsible

Roma children are freer, more spontaneous...sometimes non-Roma parents react. They don’t want to go to the playground because Roma children say bad words...Roma boys are raised with a mentality ‘I am a man and I must push and hit to prove it’; when we ask them about how they spent their weekend, they say ‘Oh, dad and mom had a fight and he slapped her in the face’ and they laugh.

However, she adds that such incidents have been decreased. Thus, Roma and non-Roma children appear to have limited or no interaction, a situation that establishes conditions of mutual distrust and preserve stereotypical images.

Some non-Roma parents react to the presence of Roma children in school (Principals G, E and H). “This is a public school, for all children...whoever does not agree he can take his child to a private school...a parent told me ‘don’t let them sit all together’” (Principal E). In the richer North suburbs of Athens, non-Roma parents also express their concern for the presence of Roma children and, as principals I and K claim, some of them transfer their children to other kindergartens. “One of their worries is about Roma children. They are mainly concerned about health issues, whether Roma children are vaccinated...” (principal I). Both principals justify these reactions

people who live close to the Roma settlement face the biggest problems...they have seen many bad things and they believe that they can happen at school as well. Parents who don't live close to the settlement are not bothered at all (Principal I)

“People that live close to the settlement have many problems with Roma” (Principal K). Even in the area with the highest degree of Roma inclusion into local society, there are still problems, especially when the number of Roma children increases “Non Roma children leave the school. Their parents give fake home address and go to other schools” (Principal A); “there are misunderstandings between Roma and non-Roma children...a non-Roma parent may come and tell me ‘this Roma makes bad things at the playground...if you accept him in school, my child will not come...’”. It is noted that the other principals from the same area (B and C), as well as principal F claim that there are no reactions from the part of non-Roma parents regarding the presence of Roma children. Principal F adds that Roma presence in local schools has been established through time and now it is taken for granted. However, one must note that the “acceptance” of Roma presence does not necessary mean that stereotypes and prejudices have been also removed.

The Role of Kindergarten Teachers Regarding the School Inclusion of Roma Children.

Initially, all principals argued that teachers treat all children equally and strive to include Roma children by bringing their culture in the classroom, although most of them did not provide with any specific example (G, I, K). Principal H states that teachers have repeatedly planned activities in which Roma parents are invited to present their culture at school. However, most times Roma parents are not willing to participate. Principal F mentions as an example of inclusive practice that once they invited a Roma grandmother to tell the class stories in Romani. Principals A and B also mentioned that teachers present Romani words in class and organize cultural activities for fostering inclusion.

The “natural talents” of the Roma children. Stereotypical images of Roma people emerge again. Roma children are presented to prefer activities that involve dance, songs or arts and crafts, and as Principal E emphasizes,

“they are very good in these activities”. Principals A, E and F state that teachers use music or dance, in order to foster inclusion of the Roma children. Principal D becomes more specific when stating that teachers in her school try to foster school inclusion through music and songs, as she believes that Roma children have a natural talent in these activities. On the other hand, “a non-Roma child will do puzzles. Roma children don’t like them”. Thus, it is taken for granted that Roma children don’t like certain activities, without being given the opportunity to develop aspects of their creativity, beyond the ones in which they are “naturally gifted”. The promotion of customs and other cultural elements can facilitate the formation of at least tolerance attitudes from the part of the dominant group towards the inferior “others”. However, simultaneously, stereotypical perceptions about the “others” are strengthened and the regularity of the dominant model is not disputed (Parthenis & Fragoulis, 2016a). Principal C, on the other hand, admits the exclusion of Roma culture from school

I have to be honest...there is fear of what Roma will say in public...they say things that are not appropriate to be heard in public. As they live in a disorderly way, without rules, we are worried that they will say such things and we do not encourage them to speak.

Parents-school relationships and conflicts. Most principals claim that they have not received complaints from Roma parents about the treatment of their children at school. On the contrary, such incidents occur in some schools of the area which is the best example of Roma inclusion in local society, probably because of the size of the Roma community and its dynamic character which may result in confrontations with school authority. Hence, Roma parents appear to be hyper-protective “some Roma parents demand from the teachers to feed their children...” (Principal A), or breaking the school rules

I remember two families, quite deprived. Children were coming to school at 9:30 am when the door closes at 8:30. I allowed it once, twice, three times...then I closed the door...they said ‘you are racist, you don’t let us in because we are Roma...’ (Principal C).

Principal B also states that she has received complaints from Roma parents,

but mainly because of fights amongst children and not the behavior of teachers toward Roma children. Principal D claims that it is difficult for teachers to discuss with Roma parents about a problem that their child may be facing, because they are easily offended “if you tell a parent that his child does not speak clearly, he may say that you are a bad teacher, that his child is clever etc.”.

Some principals (B, D, E, F) claim that they haven’t met teachers that they do not want Roma children in their class. Principal F notes that all teachers must get rid of bias and treat all children equally. On the other hand, principal G mentions that some teachers are very reluctant to the presence of Roma children, wondering “how are we going to cope with them?”. The principal urges teachers not to draw easy conclusions, be patient and treat each child individually. Principals I and K mention that they have heard other principals expressing their dismay at the presence of Roma children and trying to direct Roma parents to other schools in the neighborhood. Principal A states that some teachers do not want Roma children in their class, bringing up a recent example of a teacher who wanted to be vaccinated for hepatitis because of the presence of Roma children. Principal C notes that in her school all teachers know that they will have Roma children in their classes, but she adds that colleagues from other schools are asking her “How are you coping with the gypsy kids?”.

Policies and Practices for Promoting School Inclusion of Roma Children.

In this section, principals’ practices for the inclusion of Roma people, as well as policy suggestions are presented.

School level. Principals argue that school does not have much room for action to foster school inclusion of Roma children. School seems to deny responsibility for the education of Roma children, revealing a strong social determinism. Only Principal F argues that “we must encourage attendance; we must cooperate with Roma parents...stop treating them in a racist way...we must stop being suspicious towards them so that they stop being suspicious towards us...”.

However, most principals claim that they make efforts to foster school attendance. Thus, prior to the beginning of the school year, principal H contacts the representatives of the local Roma association in order to know

how many Roma children should attend kindergarten. Then, she tries to persuade these families to enroll their children at school. When she fails, she seeks for legal actions, as attendance in kindergarten is compulsory. Legal actions are also put forth by Principal C. Other principals ask former students or parents they meet by chance to inform their community about the beginning of enrolments in kindergarten (principals A and E), they turn to Roma mediators to locate families whose children do not attend school or they do not attend regularly (Principals A, B, C and D), or they cooperate with the municipality and other community organizations to locate Roma families and provide help in order to enroll their children in kindergarten (Principals I and K). However, almost all principals note that there are still Roma children not enrolled in kindergarten. As Principal E states, nobody can provide with an accurate estimate as to the number of Roma children who should be attending kindergarten yearly, and it is hard to contact parents whose children do not attend regularly or dropout.

Moreover, principals argue that they do not know cases of principals who discourage Roma parents from enrolling their children in kindergarten or discriminate against them. However, principal I argues that “it is good for Roma children to be dispersed, they don’t make cliques...it is a scary picture when a non-Roma parent sees many Roma children altogether...because our culture is like so, they are afraid of Roma”. Principal H shifts the entire responsibility to Roma parents when problems arise. Thus, she states that parents-principals relationships are smooth when parents cooperate with school and care about their children’s progress, but “I feel more encouraging and protective towards such parents, than towards parents that ignore me, are indifferent and do not comply with school rules”. Principal A also argues that she is stricter towards Roma parents because they tend to not respect school regulations, like the arrival time in school. Similarly,

we know that sometimes Roma people do not keep their word, they will not do what they promised to do, and so we are cautious. For example, when organizing a school event I encourage them to participate, because I don’t want them to feel marginalized...but I will not rely entirely on a Roma parent, because he may not show up to help or bring his child to the performance...inconsistency is their biggest problem, and it is what makes us treat them a little differently... (Principal D).

Community level. The need to raise awareness of Roma people about the importance of school education is emphasized (Principals B, E, G, H). Principal H praises the role of the local Roma association in promoting education amongst Roma families. She also suggests that the municipality, which has the necessary infrastructure and human resources (psychologists, social workers), should undertake awareness raising actions for the Roma. Principals I and K pinpoint the intensive efforts of the local authorities for fostering school attendance of Roma children. In specific, the municipality has employed social workers and psychologists with the task of bringing Roma children to school and guiding their parents to collect the documents required for enrollment. Moreover, the municipality provides vaccination for the children. According to both principals, local authorities have also initiated other actions to support social inclusion of Roma people, such as securing them free tickets to attend theatre performances and other cultural events.

The role of Roma mediators is also considered as crucial (Principals A, C, D, E, I). As principal C argues, the role of the mediators must be fostered, so as to reduce the communication gap between Roma families and the school: “a mediator goes to schools, works with both teachers and families... he can find children not attending school...he can go to their home, find the parents and explain to them how important is for their child to attend school...”. The need for a systematic census of the local Roma population, so that there is a clear picture of the number of children that should attend kindergarten yearly is also mentioned (principal E). Another suggestion is the initiation of educational programs for Roma and non Roma parents by the municipality (principal F).

State level. Several principals request a stricter institutional framework and legal actions for Roma not enrolling their children in kindergarten (principals C, D, E, H). Moreover, it is argued that municipalities and the government should cooperate in ensuring the transportation of Roma children to different schools of an area, so as to avoid the ghettoization of certain schools (principal E). Principal F stresses the need for measures to battle the extreme poverty experienced by many Roma in her area: “Their basic needs must be met, proper housing, electrical supply, water, shoes...ghettoization must be eradicated, children must be dispersed to different schools...if they are dispersed, they will face less racism”. The establishment of ghettos

deprives Roma people of the opportunity to improve their life chances and excludes them from the wider job market. Moreover, ghettoization limits the interaction between Roma and non-Roma and the chances of removing mutual bias and stereotypes.

It is also suggested that the state should undertake the cost for the participation of Roma children in extra-curricular activities, although it is stated that this wouldn't be fair for the non-Roma children (Principal C). Furthermore, the employment of professionals such as social workers or speech therapists is suggested, as many Roma parents don't have social security and cannot undertake the cost for supporting their children if needed (principal D). The need to support school units with educational staff specialized in intercultural education is also mentioned (principal E). Finally, the introduction of educational structures within the Roma settlements is suggested by principal I, although she notes that

this may be considered as exclusion, but it is important for the children to get into the school culture, the process of being taught, even if their parents are around...they feel it's difficult to leave their familiar space and go to school...it's like going to a foreign country...it would be good to have a pre-school structure within the settlement.

However, she adds that "it's not always about what others do for the Roma, it's also about what the Roma do for themselves...I don't know how Roma people respond to what is done for them...".

Discussion

Data analysis indicates that principals are well aware of the inadequacies of the policies regarding the inclusion of Roma people and they propose a series of measures mainly at local and central level. At first, principals' proposals are in the right direction and could be further specified and complemented with other policies.

However, reproduction of stereotypes for the Roma people is still present, partly because of the orientation of the relevant research and practice in the field that generates low expectations for them (Munte-Pascual et al, 2020; Aiello et al., 2019). Most principals' suggestions have a specific orientation,

requiring action by the local authorities, the state or the Roma people themselves, but not the school. Principals state that Roma children and their parents often face various difficulties in the school environment, as for example in their relationships with the non-Roma children and parents, in the accomplishment of school tasks, or in the participation in school life in general. However, they transfer the responsibility on Roma parents' side that are not interested and lack the skills and appropriate attitudes to support their children in the educational process (Griffith, 2001). Simultaneously, they minimize their own role to act as leaders and not as observers of what is perceived as inevitable reality and they avoid to undertake various initiatives to actively involve Roma parents in school life, as suggested in the relevant literature (Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Flecha & Soler, 2013).

Thus, the interpretation of Roma children and parents' difficulties draws mainly from a deficit perspective. Their failure to meet the official school's demands is mostly attributed to their culture and way of life, which have to be "rectified". This perspective largely explains why most principals do not emphasize on policies targeting the inadequacies and the failures of the schools and the state, i.e. policies for the improvement of teachers' education and training with regards to intercultural and anti-racist education, the openness of school to the community, the introduction of intercultural mediators or social workers especially in schools located in disadvantaged areas or the restructuring of the school knowledge (see also Parthenis & Fragoulis, 2016). Even practices that could be organized by the school and the local communities in collaboration with Roma associations, such as the promotion of Roma people that managed to succeed academically and professionally as positive role models (Munte-Pascual et al, 2020), are not even mentioned.

Conclusions and Limitations

Principals' role in multicultural schools is crucial and, even in the context of the centralized Greek education system they can facilitate and foster the development of school and local policies for the inclusion of the vulnerable "others".

This article provides with an insightful view of principals' perceptions on high dropout rates of Roma children, as well as on various aspects affecting

the inclusion of Roma people, such as their attitudes toward preschool education or their relationships with the school and the non Roma families.

However, there are also limitations deriving from the small sample of this qualitative research and its concentration in the region of Attica, as different social dynamics in smaller regions may also variously affect the educational process. Further research is required in order to explore in depth principals' views, focusing on aspects of parents' and community involvement in the educational process, as well as on policies and practices that could overturn the stereotypic view of Roma people. Moreover, a quantitative approach informed by previous qualitative research could also provide directions for the design of more targeted programs for principals' in-service training. It is also important, as part of a larger project, to bring to the fore the view of Roma people on policies and practices that affect their lives, assisting thus the educational community to face the Roma "problem", as it is usually perceived, from a different perspective.

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