

Underachievement of Roma Children in Greece



Dimitrios Kassis

Abstract This chapter aims at focusing on the current pedagogical issues which constitute pressing factors for the availability of primary education for Roma travelling children in Greece. Even though the failure of Roma students to meet the educational criteria and standards set by the official policy-making has frequently been the subject of various speculations and formulations, it has mostly been discussed on the basis of their low performance.

The first part of the chapter will describe the actual educational approaches and policy-making which have been adopted by the Greek state. The second part of the chapter places emphasis on possible interpretations of frequent school failure of Roma children and the necessary and constant role-taking of language teachers as reflective practitioners in order to adapt to their students' continuous educational needs.

Keywords Inclusion · Underachievement · Stereotyping · Pathologisation · School ethos · Minority schooling · Sedentarisation · Segregation

1 Introduction

The current educational scene in the European Union is characterised by a tendency to globalise educational standards in order to respond effectively to the enlargement of its values and policies. Skrtic (1995) maintains that the school effectiveness movement has led to the bureaucratisation, regulation and standardisation of educational authorities. This is counterproductive to the notion of diversity, a feature which is essential to the concept of inclusion in education. The concept of inclusion suggests that pupils, regardless of ethnic origin, should be incorporated into mainstream education and successfully adapt to school life (DfEE 1997).

As a consequence, minority groups who had already been faced with various kinds of discrimination in their everyday life, are forced to adapt to new conditions

D. Kassis (✉)

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

Greek Ministry of Education, Athens, Greece

which can foster new racist attitudes. The question is whether the current educational value relocation can promote a framework within which minority schooling will be free from pedagogical prejudices which give rise to exclusion.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and analyse the current conditions in Greece in conjunction with the educational models and official policy-making applied to the Roma and traveller community context. Because of the increasing possibility of Roma children segregation due to their learning weaknesses and lack of adaptability to school requirements, reflective approaches and different kinds of pedagogical theories will be discussed so as to find out whether reflective practice can succeed in improving the teaching and learning procedures and eventually removing the barriers in education. Considering Greek policy on Roma education, important conclusions can be drawn concerning the adoption of reflective practice in primary education for students from a “less privileged” background.

As a recently appointed primary school teacher of English in a Roma community, I have been faced with various difficult situations in relation to Roma children’s adaptability and school failure, and I have been exposed to my students’ needs which extend beyond the school framework. For this reason, it has been necessary for me to resort to constant decision-making in order to tackle serious issues which influence both the teaching and learning procedures.

Vygotsky (1978) maintained that all higher order psychological and pedagogical functions occur twice and always in order: first on the social level and then on the individual level. Having this theoretical approach in mind, my strategy-planning should take into account an inclusive pedagogical model, whose main focus would be on a barrier-free learning environment instead of an overemphasis on school efficiency (Lloyd 2000).

2 Current Greek Policy-Making for Roma Children

Until quite recently, Roma children’s education had been a neglected part of the official Greek educational policy-making in spite of the fact that Roma communities have been an integral part of the Greek society for many centuries and the factors of racial discrimination and underachievement have been directly related to the school performance of Roma pupils.

A common feature of the past educational planning strategies had been the systematic tendency to integrate Roma children into mainstream educational system at all costs (Smith 1997). In accordance with the official policy-makers, Roma children are more likely to be placed in special schools than students coming from non-Roma families (Cahn and Chirico 1999). In this way, no distinction was made between mentally disabled children and Roma students with learning difficulties. Therefore, pathologisation of the group has been fostered by the official educational institutions.

The National Curriculum and the common school practices had been heavily criticised because there has been an obvious mismatch between the pedagogical practices applied to Roma children and the values of the Roma families, given that

this category has often been associated with the field of special education. In other words, Roma children have often been classified as “problematic” in terms of adaptability to various learning styles and methods (Hegedus 1998). The mismatch of Roma values with the standards of mainstream classroom can lead to their further stigmatisation and gradual alienation from the school environment.

Being influenced by the continuous discussions within the framework of the European Union on the equality of chances and the elimination of segregating attitudes in school communities, the Greek educational authorities have recently launched a series of pedagogical actions which aim at supporting the role of both teachers and parents. Under the name “Education and Counseling Support for the families of Gypsies, repatriate populations and immigrants”, the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs (MoNEaRA) has constructed an ambitious project which is concerned with the creation of inclusive educational environment in the early stages of basic education, mainly in nursery and primary schools.

The official declarations of MoNEaRA in relation to the purpose of this project’s setting up are that this project focuses on the integration of student groups of particular cultural background into mainstream education as well as on the prevention of their school failure and drop-out due to the difficult financial situation of their parents (General Secretariat of Lifelong Learning 2009).

Through a careful examination of these declarations, it is evident that the current educational policy-making considers Roma education as part of a wider issue which needs tackling: the harmonisation of the Greek National Curriculum with the demands of the emerging multicultural educational reality in Greece. A close connection is seen between the learning difficulties with which Roma children are identified and family literacy. In that way, the importance of teacher-parent collaboration becomes a determinative factor for the improvement of schooling services in Roma educational communities.

3 Reasons for Roma Students’ Underachievement

Even though the failure of Roma students to meet the educational criteria and standards set by the official policy-making has frequently been the subject of various speculations and formulations, it has mostly been discussed on the basis of their low performance. That is to say, few teachers and educationalists have acknowledged the real nature of the problem and the reasons which underlie the constant conscious and unconscious refusal of Roma students to comply with given educational patterns (Réger 1995).

In order to comprehend school failure of Roma children in primary school institutions, the following scheme could successfully summarise Roma children’s low level of motivation and performance in mainstream education:

- (a) Anti-Roma atmosphere at school and around their homes
- (b) Knowledge learnt at school considered unimportant and useless
- (c) Fear of losing touch with their ethnic group
- (d) Fear of failure to assimilate
- (e) Some learning skills have not been acquired
- (f) Lack of the necessary factual knowledge (Hegedus 1998).

3.1 Roma Students and Segregating Practices at School

Insofar as segregating practices in primary education are concerned, the placement of Roma children in schools which are meant for mentally disabled students gives the general impression that official educational authorities tend to pathologise special education and treat minority schooling as peripheral (Cahn and Chirico 1999).

Consequently, the diagnosis of Roma children as students with special needs at the early stages of education within the European educational context is not used to facilitate Roma pupils' easier adaptation to the educational community. This labelling of a whole minority group as mentally disabled is seen as an easy solution to deal with an educational issue which needs urgent decision-making by connecting the problem with the factor of ethnicity.

Through the use of ethnicity as a means to justify the unsuccessful policy-making for minority schooling, the issue of racist stereotyping prevails in teaching within the classroom framework: this attitude is frequently related to teachers' low expectations of Roma children and to the racialisation of education due to the negative bias which is often associated with minority schooling (Dillon 2007). The reproduction of stereotypes linked to the factor of ethnicity can only lead to further stigmatisation of students who face learning difficulties and increase the possibility of drop-out.

3.2 Discrepancy Between Roma and Educational Values

With regard to the transmission of educational values, Gewirtz and Cribb (2009) refer to the cultural transmission perspective in education, which concentrates on the transmission of knowledge through the adaptation of Roma students to the dominant culture. Even though the notion of inclusion seems to be more and more in fashion these days, the implementation of educational programs is usually associated with the gradual assimilation of minority groups by the mainstream body of society. In doing so, Roma children are often regarded as passive recipients of the knowledge which is "imposed" on them.

Having this educational perspective in mind, a parallel can be drawn with the socio-cultural values which are embedded in Roma communities and constitute a reason for the strong discrepancy with the existent educational values which are

forwarded by national educational institutions. Through the process of incorporating Roma students into mainstream education, two kinds of pressure are usually put by the national educational policy-making on Roma families: sedentarisation and increasing educational control (Powell 2007).

Concerning the notion of sedentarisation, it might be affirmed that it constitutes the main issue of the educational debate on Roma primary education as it is intensely contrasted to mainstream school life. Western societies tend to stigmatise nomadic lifestyles, given that these lifestyles are perceived as a threat to social order, given that they are treated as signs of backwardness (McVeigh 1997). Thus, pathologisation of Roma students in education is usually relative to state intervention in the form of assimilation practices.

In addition, the irrelevance of the educational values which are promoted in primary education institutions with the cultural identity of Roma children is juxtaposed with the Roma parents' beliefs on the usefulness of education, as the Roma community is more interested in the practical character of education and less in the educational standards which are set by the school authorities (Vanderbeck 2005). Thus, the notion of learning is perceived differently by Roma parents, who are interested in the acquisition of practical skills in education in contrast with the theoretical educational patterns used in mainstream primary schools. The absence of practicality in mainstream primary education is likely to lead to school depreciation by Roma parents and students.

3.3 Role of Family-Literacy and Roma Community

Family literacy and Roma community appear to determine Roma students' reactions and relation to the mainstream body of education. A key factor which is closely related to their low school performance and inability to adapt to mainstream educational models seems to be the negative experiences that Roma parents have received during their school life, which exert strong influence on their children's overall achievement at school (Ada 1995). Consequently, the poor educational background of Roma parents in combination with the negative connotations that mainstream education carries for them are reproduced across generations.

With respect to the effect of the community on the underachievement of Roma students, it should be stressed that low rates of literacy within community members result in Roma children's lack of factual knowledge and everyday involvement in educational contexts (Britto and Brooks-Gunn 2001). In mainstream communities, children who go to primary schools are likely to have already acquired educational stimuli through their everyday exposure to reading and learning practices with the aid of their parents (Gregg 2007). Prior to knowledge acquired from primary education institutions, the majority of mainstream children learn to adopt behavioural patterns which facilitate their use of abstract notions and basic contextualised information through books and other written sources (Wright 2001; Kugelmass 2001).

Nevertheless, Roma children are unlikely to receive this “preparatory stage” before they commence primary school because they can hardly acquire any of these school initiation skills from their parents (Réger 1995). The above realisation indicates that Roma children lack basic linguistic and behavioural knowledge due to their community’s limited or no access to educational sources, a problem which is also addressed by Klaus and Marsh (2014) who assert that Roma children’s absence from early childhood and care institutions often deprives them of the opportunity to be gradually introduced to new learning patterns.

Furthermore, even if Roma students succeed in satisfying the requirements of primary education as determined by the National Curriculum, they fear of losing touch with their community. From this perspective, many Roma communities feel that school can have a disruptive impact on their younger members due to the intervention of school authorities to the cultural and societal values that underpin Roma identity (Smith 1997). In that way, educational practices can be seen as a menace against the Roma norms and values and as a means of young Roma’s alienation from their cultural heritage.

4 Principles of Inclusion for Teachers to Consider

After having observed the methods which official policy-making employs for Roma children’s education and through the exploration of the main reasons for which Roma children fail to fulfill the expectations of the official educational institutions, it might be understood that the role of primary education teachers is rather limited when it comes to official decision-making. Even so, teachers could make use of several flexible techniques in order to lead Roma students to self-confidence and better adaptability to classroom situations.

At this point, it would be particularly important to consider the pedagogical issue of Roma minority schooling from a reflective perspective. The use of the term “reflective”, which was firstly introduced by Dewey (1933), implies that teaching is not a routine-based process and reflective teaching is permeated by ongoing action and question of practice.

Action-research must be seen as a research methodology which should always govern the strategy-planning of reflective teachers who deal with multicultural/minority schooling situations. Costello (2003) defines this type of educational research as a form of research which relies heavily on the collection and interpretation of data with the aim of comprehending teaching and learning experiences to further improve schooling in marginal educational contexts. Action-research could assist the teacher in his observation of problems which arise from learning difficulties that go beyond the classroom borders so that he can plan his teaching accordingly. The conduction of research on Roma education’s socio-cultural and educational conditions could broaden the reflective practitioner’s mind on delicate issues related to segregation and pathologisation practices.

4.1 Teacher's Interrogation of Practice

This theory coincides with the need for teacher's continuing education and learning. Nevertheless, through reflective practice, Pollard (2005) suggests that teachers should function as monitors and evaluators of their own educational practices by reflecting constructively upon different ways of enriching their teaching. Therefore, reflective teaching is seen as the process during which the teacher constantly changes his priorities through self-evaluation and according to students' response to his teaching (Schön 1991). In the case of Roma students, interrogation of practice must form the basis of the teacher's role, considering the imperative needs of his students, who are limitedly exposed to educational environments and are more likely to experience disappointment in the classroom.

At this point, it would be useful to make reference to the notion of inclusion, which is a prevalent notion in EU educational institutions and appears to coincide with Greek governmental measures within the framework of minority schooling. As declared by UNESCO (2008: 1), there is an emphasis on "inclusive quality education in order to end exclusion" in an attempt to implement policies which could ensure quality in minority schooling through the successful inclusion of the weakest members of the school authorities in mainstream schools.

Since segregation and pathologisation are the most frequent situations with which Roma students are usually faced, the reflective teacher must try to adopt inclusive practices which could reduce segregating and stigmatising situations that can be disastrous to minority schooling. These inclusive practices must encourage every student's active engagement with school activities instead of keeping particular student groups in isolation, a fact which might lead to their further exclusion from the school community (James and Freeze 2006).

4.2 Individualization of Education and Twin-Track System

On the basis of reflective practice in primary education, teachers who must deal with the issues of educational segregation and stereotyping in the classroom must also approach it as a challenge for their professional development and not as a problem which impedes the teaching process. According to Juggins (2001), the educational system should find the appropriate method to match the learning style as well as the educational needs of the student and not the other way around.

By the same token, role-undertaking between the teacher and the Roma students is also encouraged within a reflective context given the fact that reflective practice enables teachers to drastically interact with their norms students through the assumption of different roles, given that the professional capacity of the teachers is interrelated with their personal interest in their students' welfare (Bolton 2005). By establishing a common point of communication, the teacher and the Roma student

can take on different roles which will lead to effective interaction and careful individualisation of the student's needs (Kugelmass 2001). Assuming that Roma students lack factual and interactive knowledge, reflective teachers should inform their teaching practices accordingly so that their Roma students can learn ways of processing contextualised knowledge patterns.

Concerning the use of the twin-track system, Cullingford and Daniels (1999) describes it as a system, which involves a separate holistic learning environment for students within the mainstream school authority. Originally, this system was created for the inclusion of students with special needs within the framework of mainstream schools, but it has also started to be applied to minority schooling to prevent the alienation of students with different cultural or learning characteristics from mainstream education (Nayler and Keddie 2007). In Greece, this educational model aspires to bridge the gap between special/minority education and the mainstream education through individualisation of education within the mainstream classroom. In general, the notion of individualisation through collaboration with the mainstream community could be of great importance in multicultural/minority educational environments because the need to individualise a specific educational programme does not only concern Roma children but also pertains to the whole school community, considering the potentiality to instill communal behaviour in every member of the multicultural classroom (Rogojinaru 1997).

4.3 Socialisation and Extended Schools

Apart from the application of twin-track system strategies for the promotion of individualisation and equalisation of chances, official educational policies have also introduced another important measure which can facilitate the triple relationship teacher-student-parent (Lloyd 2000). Extended schools were not originally intended for multicultural/minority schooling but as a strategy, they can serve the purpose of Roma students' socialisation in a very effective way. According to this strategy, primary schools might promote the participation of all children in common activities (e.g. dance, drama) on the school premises, even after normal school hours, in an attempt to encourage further cooperation and interaction amongst its members and to contribute to all students' welfare (Devon School Childcare 2007). Therefore, Roma students can socialise with their peers and become largely involved in activities which can be determined in collaboration with their teacher and classmates.

However, the most important contribution of extended schools can be the partnership between teachers and Roma parents. As previously mentioned, Roma parents tend to have a rather negative attitude towards mainstream primary education, and they criticise its lack of practicality (Ada 1995; Rogojinaru 1997). Extended schools can enhance home-school relationships between Roma parents and teachers, given the fact that they require more parental involvement than conventional schools, and they have more practical and communicative attributes. In that way, extended schools can boost teacher-parent communication and common

decision-making in order to render the school atmosphere more inviting (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003).

5 Conclusion

Through this presentation of the core issues, policies and practices which are linked to Roma education, it is concluded that emphasis must be placed on the teachers' role as facilitators and reflective practitioners: being confronted with the challenging educational reality of minority schooling, teachers must be characterised by "(a) openness and respect towards children of diverse backgrounds, (b) constant initiative-taking, (c) awareness of the role of extended family, (d) necessity that schools and families must be active in joint causes" (Hegedus 1998: 11). Minority schooling can be a thorny aspect of primary education. Thus, teachers who become involved in this educational reality must ensure full participation of their students without letting educational stereotypes affect the teaching and learning processes.

Overall, it might be highlighted that reflective practice should be pursued by professional teachers who wish to meet the needs of Roma students through the careful consideration of the socio-cultural background of their students. This reflective attitude will help teachers achieve self-recognition through the appropriate research and constant interrogation of their practices. At the same time, minority schooling policies need to be free from pedagogical prejudices which could give rise to further segregation of minority students. Consequently, educational value relocation and continuous policy shifting may victimise Roma students if factors such as family and tradition are not taken into serious consideration by official policy-makers.

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