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Providing psychological and counselling services to Roma students: A preliminary report for a three-year longitudinal project

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Abstract

The purpose of this report is to present preliminary results from a specific action of a development project on the psychosocial and counselling support of Roma students in Western Greece. Roma children are part of one of the largest minorities in Greece. Within the framework of multicultural education, the goal of the project is to alleviate the lack of educational opportunities and reduce the marginalization of Roma children. Ultimately, the goal of the entire project is the empowerment of Roma community members to create active citizens and develop citizenship identity. The particular action affected approximately 450 Roma students attending 10 specifically selected public elementary schools and 5 kindergartens with large concentrations of Roma students. The action team, consisting of psychologists, social workers and special educators, interacted with Roma students on a weekly basis. Team members organized individual and group counselling meetings, confidence-building and emotion awareness exercises. Furthermore, team members regularly consulted with and offered psychological support to teachers of the schools involved in the project in order to facilitate teacher-student interactions. Preliminary results suggested the following: an increase of new school registrations for Roma students has been noted. Interviews with Roma students indicated great interest to participate in the programme and to remain in the school throughout the academic year. As the project continues into its second year, it is expected that the numbers of students involved with the project will further increase. It is also expected that the rate of school dropout will decrease even more and the level of Roma students' school performance will improve. Nevertheless, despite these positive results, external negative factors affecting the progress of the programme have been identified: hidden racism towards Roma students and their families and a general disapproval of Roma students attending the local schools in specific areas.

Keywords: *Roma children, psychological support, counselling, schooling*

Introduction

The present report presents some preliminary results emanating from the programme 'The Education of Roma Children' in the Region of Western Greece. Although the entire project covers several aspects of social life and takes place in various regions in Greece, the results of the present report will focus only on the particular action of psychological and counselling support for Roma students in this particular geographic area of Greece.

Roma children are part of one of the largest ethnic minorities not only in Greece, but in Europe, as well. They are also known as and are commonly referred to as Gypsies (Pnevmatikos, Geka & Divane, 2010). The exact number of Roma people living in

Greece cannot be estimated precisely due to the absence of official census records. In Europe, the number of Roma people is estimated at approximately nine million, while in Greece, and despite the lack of official numbers, Greek Roma population is considered to be the third largest among Western European countries. Unofficial Greek state records put the number of Roma people at around 120-150 thousand, while local authorities estimate them at around 200-300 thousand people (information taken from the Council of Europe, and the Greek ROMnet).

Certain special characteristics in the Roma population stand out and often work as a source of friction and conflict with local communities. First, one must consider the Roma peoples' choices concerning the preservation of their nomadic life, their (non-permanent) place of residence, their traditional costumes and clothing styles, the early (and often forced) betrothal of children, as well as their extensive use of the Romani language instead of the Greek language (Pnevmatikos et al, 2010). Second, there are additional linguistic limitations (illiteracy, limited communication with local, regional, and national government authorities) causing the Roma people to be socially excluded and isolated. In addition, the existence of traditional discrimination and racism against the Roma people help create a vicious circle in which early discrimination leads to exclusion, which leads to limited participation in local societies, exclusion from social services, which in turn generates more negative attitudes and so on (DI.KA.DI. – ROM, 2006).

Due to the aforementioned characteristics, Roma people often find themselves stigmatised in local societies. They are considered dirty, untrustworthy, shrewd, crime-prone. This stigmatisation can also be seen in the schooling of Roma children. Often, Roma children will be seated at different desks alone with no company from other students. The stigmatisation and limited exclusion may also take place during school recess in the school playground. In addition, often school authorities segregate Roma students as a response to the students' behavioural and augmented learning problems. The latter could also lead to the frequent placement of these pupils in 'special schools' which is still a worrying phenomenon not only in Greece, but in EU as well (EUMC, 2006).

Because of the constant moving from town to town and the difficult living conditions of Roma families, it is often difficult to attempt the integration of Roma children within the school system even when stigmatisation and other social issues have been dealt with. It has already been established that Roma people remain one of the most misunderstood, marginalised and discriminated-against social group (Tamas, 2001). In the European Union, 80% of the adult Roma populations are illiterate and more than 50% of the Roma children never go to school. The lack of schooling may be due to the fact that 'Roma families are not familiar with the formal educational system and the school environment and often see no usefulness of formal education other than basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills for their children' (Triandafyllidou, 2011, p. 13). In Greece, research has shown that the participation percentage of the Roma children in the primary education does not exceed 40% and that the percentage of illiterate adult Roma population is reaching 80% (DI.KA.DI. – ROM, 2006). Nevertheless, attempts are constantly being taken in order to alleviate some of the social and educational problems of Roma children and their families within an intercultural educational context. Within

this context, the Greek state has attempted (through various educational programmes) to remove educational inequalities, to lift barriers to schooling opportunities and to limit the marginalisation of Roma students. Of course, such attempts do not focus exclusively on Roma children, but on the entire school community, namely, students, teachers and parents regardless of their ethnic origin.

When such attempts are taken, psychologists (and school psychologists, in particular), play an important role in assisting the entire school community. The assistance may take the form of community liaison, providing information to teachers and parents, helping struggling students with behavioural and learning problems. In other words, school psychologists are called to play roles they had always played throughout the years (Dimakos, 2006). Of equal importance is the fact that psychologists try to understand the reasons for the diverse behaviour of Roma students and their parents. Although some of the processes affecting social behaviour do not differ from culture to culture, they are often expressed with different intensity within different ethnic, social and cultural groups. Therefore, the origins of such processes must be known to every single member of the group, if we are to predict the differences, at a behavioural level, between different cultures (Smith & Bond, 2011).

Promoting Resilience for Roma students

A major point this programme has tried to raise and is reported here, is the issue of resilience for Roma students. Esquivel, Doll & Oades-Sese (2011) define resilience from a systemic point of view as the complex interaction between the personality characteristics of the child and external support forces (family, school, community) that isolate the effects of adverse situations, which may put the children in danger of negative social, educational, personal development results. The research has already led to the identification of three factors that affect the development of resilience (all centred around the children): (1) personality characteristics, (2) familial characteristics, and (3) social environment characteristics (Masten, 2001; Masten & Garmezy, 1985).

Students not actively involved in the school process are often more at risk of dropping out of school. Roma students are a characteristic example of students with limited school experience and exposure. Therefore, the purpose of the reported project and actions was to enhance the protective factors that increase the resilience of Roma students, thus increasing their chances of remaining at school. More specifically, these factors focus on the following (Doll, Zucker & Brehm, 2009; Doll, Spies, LeClair, Kurien & Folley, 2010):

1. The teacher - students relationships, based on the same connections, as the relationships between the children and their parents. Although the educators seem more powerful and responsible for the creation of this relationship, its power affects both parties, especially as far as behaviour, progress and social success of the students is concerned;
2. The peer relationships that provide students with the companionship, the help, the comfort, and make school more 'fun'. The relationships between fellow students have a close link to academic success. In spite of all these, there is

always the possibility that students experience, to a great extent, negative relationships with their fellow students, leading to stress and reduced participation in school affairs. These students are in danger of giving up school altogether;

3. The family-school relationships, where the close and effective interactions between school and family are related to positive outcomes for students, especially as far as the completion of schooling is concerned;
4. Academic self-esteem and behavioural self-control. The students, who believe they can make it in school, seem to find a way to achieve their goal and, thus, develop greater self-esteem. Additionally, students are affected by what they experience when they succeed or fail. Similarly, they are also affected by the success or failure of their student peers and by the verbal persuasion and enhancement they seem to receive from their educators and their peers. In contrast, inappropriate behaviours contribute to school failure and weak relationships between students and their teachers and between students and their student peers.

‘The Education of Roma Children’ programme

‘The Education of Roma Children’ programme is a three-year long programme initiated by the University of Athens with the participation of academic departments across the country. The purpose of this particular programme is to alleviate the lack of educational opportunities, various educational inequalities and the marginalization of Roma children and their families. Ultimately, the goal of the entire project is to properly include Roma families in the larger Greek society, the empowerment of Roma community members in order to create more active citizens within Greek society, and the development of citizenship identity within the Roma community.

One of the programme’s goals is (1) to increase the access of Roma children to preschool education (during the two years of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten), (2) to facilitate their early registration to primary school (which occurs in June after the end of the previous academic year) and their familiarisation with the school community, and (3) to assist Roma children as they go through mandatory education, which encompasses the 6 grades of primary school and the 3 years of middle school (in Greek, gymnasium). In order to achieve such a lofty goal, the cooperation of school educators, social workers and psychologists is needed. In addition, the programme must assist Roma families at home and Roma children at school and take into account the special needs and characteristics of Roma culture. A discussion about the assistance given to Roma families is beyond the scope of the present paper but appears elsewhere in this volume.

Essentially, the long-term goal of the programme is to harmoniously integrate Roma students into the Greek educational system while reducing the students’ dropout and failure rates. Indirectly, the programme aims to lift some of the school and social exclusion Roma children face on a daily basis and to empower the members of the Roma community. In this context, the programme tries to ensure that Roma children are (and will always be) accepted by the entire school community. In addition, the programme tries to provide educators with the requisite sensitivity training, appropriate educational

material to support their classroom work, and to raise the awareness of the local educational authorities to the specific needs of the Roma community. An important part of this programme is titled 'Providing Psychosocial Support' and is presented below.

Providing Psychosocial Support

As far as psychosocial support is concerned, the specific action attempts to promote the integration of Roma children into the school system, taking into consideration their social and cultural specificities, and to help them achieve both at school and in society, in general. It seeks to change the educational procedures and is addressed to both Roma and other native children fostering an atmosphere of 'living and acting together'. At the same time, it aims to limit the stereotypes and biases against individuals and cultures, to achieve acceptance and respect for the 'other' and the recognition of the cultural identity of the target group. All these happen through daily efforts and continuous dialogue, understanding and cooperation between the programme's expert psychologists and the school community.

The formation of the intervention model, in student groups of Roma origin, and in school classrooms, includes:

1. Selection of school units – pilot stage (Stage A);
2. Training of educators and educational administrators on the intervention model;
3. Contacting with locally involved social agencies;
4. Initiating activities for all students in the same classrooms Roma students attend;
5. Initiating activities with groups of Roma students;
6. Initiating activities with educators and members of the local community.

The above actions require regular visits to schools with large numbers of Roma students on a weekly basis. Programme personnel (psychologists, special education teachers, social workers) cooperate with the local educators and parents, thus providing services to the student community as a whole. Great care is also taken in order to protect the privacy of Roma children who participate in the programme.

The case of Western Greece

Currently, ten primary schools and five kindergartens participate in the programme in the administrative region of Western Greece, covering the prefecture of Achaia. There should be approximately 450 Roma students attending these schools. In reality, less than half of the eligible Roma students partially attend schools. In addition, for many cases, the students' chronological age does not match their grade assignment.

At the beginning of the programme, Roma students' active participation and involvement in school life was very limited. In some cases, trouble and in-school violence between Roma students and the rest of the students had been reported. Moreover, at the beginning of the academic year 2011-2012, several local parents whose children were attending a kindergarten with a large number of Roma students

complained to local authorities and requested separate classroom assignments for their children.

A team consisting of specially trained psychologists, social workers and special educators works with Roma students on a weekly basis. One of the early goals of the action has been the reduction of student dropout and failure rates. Team members hold person-to-person and group counselling meetings, social activities, and confidence building and emotion awareness exercises. In addition, special education teachers follow the school progress of Roma students. Furthermore, the team members regularly consult with and offer psychological support to the teaching staff of the schools involved in the project in order to facilitate teacher-student interactions and to minimize (albeit, to a lesser extent) the amount of teacher burnout as reported by teachers themselves. They are also available on an as-needed basis in case of emergencies

More specifically, psychological intervention activities focus on:

a) Psychological and social development of Roma students and their successful integration within the school community.

It focuses on the acceptance of the diversity and the cultural differences of the Roma students and also takes into account the socioeconomic context, within which Roma people live. These activities include the development of the following skills:

1. Communication skills;
2. Recognition, expression and management of emotions and feelings;
3. Self-perception and self-esteem;
4. Social skills;
5. Diversity and culture.

During the programme's pilot phase (March – May 2011), the needs of schools and students were assessed and interventions planned for the following academic year, 2011-2012. Some early intervention programmes were applied during this pilot phase to a limited number of schools. These interventions involved the entire classroom (both native and Roma students), in order to create a climate of mutual respect, trust, and understanding between students and the psychologists. With the beginning of the academic year 2011-2012, additional kindergartens and primary schools were brought into the programme. During this phase, new intervention activities were rolled out, including individual sessions, group sessions and team-building exercises. Gradually, in primary schools (especially, schools with large numbers of Roma students) the intervention activities focused primarily on Roma students alone. These activities involved individual sessions, experiential exercises, aiming directly, at the present stage, to reduce school dropouts and failure.

b) Counselling support for teachers

Team psychologists regularly consult with and offer psychological support to teachers of the schools involved in the project in order to facilitate teacher-student interactions. The consultation process of psychologists and teachers involved the following stages (modified to suit the multicultural conditions of the schools):

1. *Creating a counselling relationship between consultant and consultee.* The consultant-psychologist enters the school and seeks an initial understanding of the culture of the participating members. Here, it is particularly important to record the arising problems, the needs of the Roma student-client, the system and the educator-consultee, but also the special characteristics of the culture of the triad members.
2. *Identifying the problem (collaborating relationship- investigating stage of the needs, the problems, the methods and the intervention levels).* The psychologists collect data, relevant with the targeted problem, investigate the related factors, the attitudes and the perceptions of educators and extract the characteristics of Roma students, through a relative with their culture understanding.
3. *Selection and application of intervention.* The consultants-psychologists will help the consultee teachers choose the way of problem solving, having thoroughly investigated the factors that affect the problem and move forward to the common planning of an intervention procedure.
4. *Assessment of intervention and the consulting procedure.* At this stage, both the intervention outcomes and the consulting procedure between consultant and consultee will be assessed and the positive elements of the whole procedure will be sought, regardless of the outcomes (Hatzichristou, 2012; Meyers, 1995).

Results

During the 3rd semester of the academic year 2010-2011, the team experts used questionnaires and interviews with Roma students and school teachers to assess the needs of the children. Based on the analysis of the relevant data, the team verified the following:

1. Roma students perform very poorly at school.
2. Roma students have been the recipients of negative social biases and prejudices.
3. Roma students have been discriminated against in schools.
4. Roma students are not enrolled to attend school.
5. Even when their parents complete their enrolment process, Roma students' school attendance is limited and they often drop out entirely without completing the academic year.
6. Roma students have difficulties in adjusting to and following the requirements of the daily school programme.
7. Roma students come poorly dressed and do not have the materials required for school (school bag, notebooks, pencils and so on).
8. Roma student attendance is hindered by the illiteracy of their parents.
9. The rejection shown by other native school peers, the peers' parents (and often by the teachers) assists in increasing school dropout rates.
10. Roma students lack any kind of preschool training almost completely.

It was during this pilot phase that team psychologists held their first consultation meetings with teachers in order to establish a close relationship and to identify any problems teachers face in their work.

When the academic year 2011-2012 began, various external factors hindering Roma students' enrolment in schools came into play. According to state regulations, all students attending schools must be properly vaccinated. In the case of Roma students, many of them had a spotty vaccination history. Some had limited or no vaccination at all. With the support of a local agency (the Medical-Social Centre of Western Achaia), vaccinations were completed and students gained access to local schools. In addition, team members were in constant contact with parents in order to remind them to send their children to school.

With regards to in-school activities, the team experts continued to conduct their personal and group meetings as outlined before. In addition, another part of the broader programme came into play and various crafts and arts activities were added to the daily school programme. These artistic interventions were aimed not only at Roma students but the entire school population and were received enthusiastically by students.

As far as teachers are concerned, during this academic year (2011-2012) team members continued their consultation meetings with them and offered ideas and suggestions for in-class interventions led by the teachers and supervised by the team specialists. They were also able to offer a limited amount of direct psychological support to teachers in order to assist with issues of stress and burnout due to the fact that most schools in the programme are far away from the city of Patras and a large number of teachers in these schools were new temporary hires with limited exposure to Roma students.

Lastly, two more initiatives should be mentioned: First, a number of lectures to teachers and parents were held in order to inform teachers and parents about racism, xenophobia, in-school violence, acceptance of the 'other', as well as crisis interventions. Second, team members participated and organised a book fair with the support from Patras bookstores in order to expose Roma students (as well as the rest of the student body) to books and literature.

Conclusions – Future directions

The early findings of this project, which were presented above, are consistent with results from previous studies which have found several inefficiencies in the education of Roma children (DIKADI – ROM, 2006; Omas Synergion, 2008). These preliminary results showed an increase in new school enrolments for Roma students. Interviews with Roma students indicated an increase in the amount of interest to participate in the programme, and to remain in the school throughout the academic year. Despite best efforts, Roma students continued to leave school some time after Easter, often to work on farm jobs. Similar results were observed in previous intervention programs for Roma people (Papadimitriou, Mamarelis & Niarchos, 2011). While, this year saw an increase in negative attitudes and behaviours on the part of native parents toward Roma students, these negative feelings were not observed in native students. At least, they saw something positive in the Roma student peers. Similarly, teachers in the schools involved in the program, had a more positive attitude and in-classroom behaviour towards their Roma students.

As the programme enters its second year of full operation (academic year 2012-2013), it is expected that there will be an even higher increase in new school enrolments, a decrease in dropout rates (despite the usual attitude of early termination of school attendance in order to work) and a modest improvement in Roma students' school performance. Although, it is almost impossible to attain a perfect school record, it is still possible to keep the majority of Roma students within the school system, and to help them improve their knowledge, their language and their social skills. Ultimately, it is hoped that as these students grow and start their own families they will pass some of that knowledge and desire to learn to their own children, thus making solid steps in becoming full citizens in a multicultural society.

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