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Roma Children's Access to Education during COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Albania

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Abstract---This study focuses on the education of Roma children in Albania during the pandemic conditions due to the SARS CoV-2 virus. The effectiveness of the teaching & learning process during this period has been low, especially for Roma children, who even under normal conditions result the ones lacking quality access to the education system. The study advances the hypothesis that Roma pupils are the category that did not have access during pandemics to the teaching and learning process. The purpose of the study is to highlight the situation roma children faced during the pandemic, the level & quality of the access they had to this process and to provide some recommendations for improving the situation. The research questions raised in our study, were answered through interviews conducted with Roma children's parents and teachers at schools in Elbasan where the number of these children is high. The data and results of the study proven the hypotheses that were advanced. recommendations are directed to the central governance institutions as well as tothe local government.

Keywords---access teaching, learning process, online teaching, pandemic, Roma children.

Introduction

In March 2020 (VKM No. 243, dated 4.03.2020), Albania declared a state of emergency and the country was placed in quarantine due to the situation caused by the SARS CoV-2virus. This decision brought the immediate closure of schools, which would resume their work online. In the face of such a situation, learning resumed for all students of the pre-university system in a chaotic situation. According to a World Bank report (Regular Economic Report for the Western Balkans) there were reported difficulties in pupils' access to this kind of teaching throughout the country. It is to be emphasized that the digitization of teaching & learning more than a way of learning, is a way of thinking (Stojanovski et al., 2012; Dolean et al., 2019).

The lesson hourstook place via WhatsApp, email, phones, some non-public school managed to take advantage of platforms such as ZOOM ("Turgut Ozal" colleges) and very few other schools managed to sporadically use platforms such as School me, Edu4school, which had been part of the projects or were in pilot phase. Across the country, the number of students in pre-graduate education is 462807 (INSTAT). Learning efficiency during this period was low and a significant proportion of children. mainly those living in rural areas, failed to access teaching. Roma children are also part of this category, due to the fact that Roma children even under normal conditions are those who result as the most uneducated (Osmanaj, 2013). The study advances the hypothesis that they are the category that did not have access during pandemics to teaching andlearning. The purpose of the study is to highlight the situation Roma children faced during the pandemic and how much access they had to the process. Indifference to this category as the most marginalized in the Albanian society Osmanaj (2013), is bringing about the phenomenon of school dropout on the part of Roma children. This study tries to place an emphasis on the need for this category of children to be involved in this process as soon as possible (Mishra, 2020; Ke, 2010).

We have put Roma children at the centre of our study as they are considered the least educated category in Albania and a category in risk for school dropout. To further inquire upon the issue, study conducted by World Bank can be mentioned: Roma and Egyptians in Albania: from social expulsion to social integration De Soto et al. (2005), where a clear depiction of the Romachildren education is given in the comparative context between the two systems: roma education in and after the communist period. The study presents the general situation of education and concludes that Roma have been more educated in the period of communism. At Risk: Social Vulnerability of Roma in Albania is a study, which emphasizes the alarming situation of the education of the Roma community, concluding that women are less educated than men, as well as explaining the causes of why their educational situation has reached these levels. "The Educational Site of Roma Children", conducted by UNICEF and Save the Children, Tamo & Karaj (2007), is a study focused on the attendance of school by Roma children of the 8-year education school level, as well as the school dropout. The study "Mapping of the Services for Roma Children" Gedeshi & Jorgoni (2011), describes the socio-economic situation of Roma communities in Albania and also pays attention to the access to education of this community. While the work "The religious factors of Roma integration in Albania" puts Roma children in focus and their educational level in Albania. It is these studies that are indicative of the concerning situation faced by Romachildren. In the face of a global pandemic and teaching resuming online, it was considered of paramount importance to observe if the situation was as previously, or it had deteriorated (Mufaridah, 2021; Sarnoto & Hayatina, 2021).

The methodology & instruments that were used

The study centres on Roma children attending school in Elbasan. The city of Elbasan has been chosen because it is considered one of the 3 cities in Albania with the highest number of Roma community. In the District of Elbasan, according to data from the Local Education Office, 301 Roma children attend school, of whom 292 in primary education and only 9 of them in low secondary education. Also, the number of Roma children attending preschool education amounts to 64 children. This number varies from year to year. The focus of this study was middle school education, where the number of Roma children is higher. The schools in which the study was focused were: "Hamit Mullisi" with a number of 93 Roma children, of whom 38 were girls and the school "Abdyl Paralloi" with 67 Roma children, of whom 22 are girls.

Even before the pandemic, the problems that accompany Roma children in education are numerous, such as: lackof books, lack of school tools, absence form school lesson hours due to difficult economic conditions, forced child labor etc. What is evident among this community is the low interest that parents of Roma children have in education, since they do not consider education as an opportunity to change the life of their children (Jashari & Osmanaj, 2019). Added to this situation are the problems that were brought about by the pandemics and online teaching; it is thought that the education level of Roma children has decreased even more and their interest in school as well (Ginaya et al., 2018; Kanca et al., 2020).

The chosen method of the study was the qualitative method as a method that highlights the personal experience of the people involved in the study as well as a method, which gives us the ability to understand internal experience (Bryman, 2012). The instruments used are semi-structured interviews divided into three sessions. The sessions are intended to orient the interviewees in their answers by receiving real and concrete answers. Part of the study are 30 people: 10 parents of Roma children, 10 key teaching persons, 10 school principals as well as assistant teachers. Our study has a geographical extent within the city of Elbasan including its peripheral areas. The city of Elbasan was not randomly chosen, but carefully picked, because it is the city where a high number of the Roma community live. Championing without probability is seen as appropriate for the study; this was done after identifying schools with the highest number of Roma children and selecting parents of children who frequent 9-year-old education. Semi-structured interviews have given us the opportunity to orient the people involved in the study towards its purpose. The time of the study was 2 months and interviews were conducted physically and online through the Teams platform for teachers (Tetty, 2020; Widana et al., 2020).

Results

Online teaching in middle school was conducted immediately after the publication of the Normative Act No.3, dated 15.03.2020 "For taking special administrative measures during the duration of infection caused by COVID-19". Most of the teachers interviewed admit that it was an unfamiliar process for them and that at the beginning of this process there were many dilemmas for them. Most of them admit that to develop online teaching they have mainly used WhatsApp. Except for two teachers, who claim to have used ZOOM and Google Classroom. Regarding the difficulties they have had, they say that online teaching has been "challenging" and that it has not lasted more than 30 minutes (Khan & Smith, 2020; Downar et al., 2010).

Regarding Roma children, all teachers interviewed have Roma children in their classrooms. Asked about their number in classes, they say they have 5, 4, 2, 3 etc. Asked how many of them have attended online teaching, teachers answered that none of the Roma children attended online teaching in the March–June 2020 time frame. Asked what the reasons were, they say the lack of internet, lack of phones, computers or even tablets were the main obstacles. Some teachers admit that from the communication they had during this period with their parents they stated that even when a mobile phone was available in the family, itwas used by all family members. Regarding the alternatives to direct teaching, teachers admit that the Roma pupils have had an alternative to take lessons through "RTSH school", a programme that was broadcasted by public television where teachersexplained lessons to all those children who did not have access to online teaching and not only (Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Assareh & Bidokht, 2011).

Regarding Roma parents who have also been interviewed they admit that their children during this period have not had access to the online teaching, most of them even face difficulties in understanding it as a process. Most of them say that during the pandemic they had various problems related to food, hygiene, and other elements of daily living and that they had no opportunity to closely assist their children. Teachers also acknowledge that Roma children were that category of children who had less or no access to online learning during the pandemic. Some of them say they have had no contact with them because of the lack of contact numbers with parents and lack of infrastructure from their part. Many teachers have stated that these children do not have any smart phones, computers or tablets in their families. Part of it did not have access to the internet. Even in cases where parents have been contacted by teachers they have expressed that they do not have the opportunity to help their children in online learning, some did not understand at all the process, even when they had a smart phone it could not be put to the child's use as oftenthey had no internet or the phone was used by some members of families including children. The effective possibility to assist their children and in some cases the interest of Roma parents has been low in the education of their children (Reed et al., 2006; Martín-Blas & Serrano-Fernández, 2009).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study carried out in Elbasan on the learning process for the Roma children during the pandemic period pointed out that Roma children have not had access to online learning consequently they have not beenable to carry out the school year programme. Roma children have not had access to any online teaching platform. The pandemic only deepened their lack of education and made them more distant from school. Romachildren's teachers have not had the opportunity to communicate with them during the pandemic period, so testing knowledge has been almost impossible. Parents have not been supportive in this process and have not had the right knowledge and opportunities to do so. Online learning is no solution forRomachildren, who because of living conditions find it impossible to develop this kind of teaching (Topi et al., 2020).

Based on the results and conclusions of our study, we recommend that urgent measures should be taken to indicate with utmost precision the number ofRomachildren, whodo not have access toonline learning. Replace the lost hours of learning after shortages and needs have been highlighted even with supplementary hours. To indicate the needs these children have to equip them with appropriate tools for the development of online learning as pandemic continues and online teaching can still be in place. Equipping them with the necessary toolssuch as computers, tablets or smartphones can be done in cooperation between local government andcentralpower by also seeking the help of non-governmental organizations and businesses in the country. Train parents of Roma children on the proper use of technology; this can effectively be done in co-operation with non-governmental bodies and universities, which can make their laboratories available.

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