

PARTICIPATION OF ROMA PUPILS IN NON-FORMAL EDUCATION IN LITHUANIA

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Abstract. While Lithuania has made significant progress in integrating Roma pupils into the education system, real changes are still insufficient and require attention to the participation of Roma pupils in non-formal education. The aim of this paper is to highlight the opportunities and limitations of Roma pupils' participation in non-formal education. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data. The participants in the study included 11 parents of Roma pupils, 8 school social pedagogues, and 3 workers from NGOs. Content analysis was conducted. Roma parents relate the benefits of non-formal education to children's meaningful leisure time, the development of skills necessary for a successful future, and the improvement of health. Parents face problems related to the accessibility and financing of non-formal education for pupils with special needs. Social pedagogues observe the involvement of primary school Roma pupils in events, various sports, or art groups. However, teenagers tend not to participate in non-formal education at school. Teenagers engage in non-formal education outside of school when events or sports activities are financed by sponsors rather than the family budget. Recognition of the contribution of NGOs in supporting and involving Roma pupils in non-formal education is crucial. This support is not only important for the promotion of Roma identity but also for strengthening the motivation of teenagers to attend school classes.

Keywords: parents of pupils, participation in non-formal education, Roma pupils, social pedagogues, workers of non-governmental organizations.

Introduction

In recent years, European countries have focused on non-formal education, aiming to ensure that all groups in society, especially children, could acquire the competences necessary for future life and the creation of a democratic community. There is now a boom in non-formal education for children in Europe as more and more people and institutions recognise its value in today's dynamic and unpredictable society. However, it is noted that there is not enough focus on non-formal education, and that non-formal education experiences should be shared more widely (Bejko, 2023). There is a consensus that non-formal education promotes personal and collective development, has a progressive impact on disadvantaged and under-represented communities, and fosters intercultural understanding, tolerance, and mutual respect. The Council of Europe stresses that Roma children must have access to quality education and support, not only as a matter of children's rights but also as a strategic investment for countries to address their inclusion in education, thereby strengthening their potential to contribute to the creation of socially inclusive and sustainable societies (Buces, 2023). In Lithuania, Roma inclusion is carried out in accordance with international obligations under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Council of Europe, 1995) and other international conventions and treaties. Also, in 2020, the European Commission presented the EU Strategic Plan for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation 2020-2030, which calls on EU countries to develop national strategic plans for integration that address the needs of Roma, including in education (The Council of the Europe Union, 2021; Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2021). Lithuanian researchers (Jevsejevienė, Survutaitė, Šetkus, & Zablackė, 2022; Žemaitėlytė-Ivanavičė, 2018; Račkauskaitė, 2017) analysed the compatibility of local Roma integration measures with the Action Plan for the Integration of Roma into Lithuanian Society 2015-2020 (Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, 2015) and the Council of Europe recommendations on effective Roma integration measures in member states (Council of Europe, 2013), and analysed aspects of exclusion and levelling. D. Survutaitė (2023), based on the experience of teachers, analysed the difficulties of Roma children's education in schools and formulated solutions to overcome the challenges in order to ensure the quality of education. However, there is a lack of research and data on the participation of Roma pupils in non-formal education. An increasing number of Roma pupils are involved in non-formal education activities in day-care centres or other organisations in Lithuanian cities, but their participation is not as high as that of Lithuanian pupils and therefore requires further studies and discussions.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the opportunities and limitations of Roma pupils' participation in non-formal education. The paper seeks to answer the question - How do Roma parents, school social pedagogues, and non-

governmental organizations (NGO) workers explain the opportunities and limitations of Roma pupils' participation in non-formal education, based on their own experiences?

Opportunities for Roma children in non-formal education

The Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport aims to provide non-formal education to children of national minorities (including Roma) to enable them to develop their national, ethnic, and linguistic identity, learn their mother tongue, history, and culture. After school hours, pupils can freely choose various non-formal education activities provided in general schools. Most of these activities are free of charge or paid for by the pupil's educational voucher, established in 2015. Pupils can also attend classes at various non-formal education schools, such as sports, music, fine arts, or art schools, leisure centres, or children's clubs. Classes are partially subsidized, and fees are determined by the founder (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2021). Lithuanian researchers (Kontvainė, 2016; Petrušauskaitė, 2014), while analyzing the cooperation between Roma communities and municipalities in implementing the Action Plan for the Integration of Roma into Lithuanian Society 2015-2020 (Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, 2015), drew attention to ensuring opportunities for Roma pupils to participate in the education system. The early withdrawal of Roma pupils from the education system, including non-formal education programmes, has been noted. Although the participation of Roma in the Lithuanian education system is improving, their level of education still significantly lags behind the general achievement indicators of schoolchildren in the country and is insufficient. There is still a tendency among Roma pupils to complete only grades 7-8 of compulsory education and to drop out of school and the non-formal education process (Department of National Minorities, 2022). In recent years, many municipalities with a large Roma diaspora have paid particular attention to the inclusion and retention of Roma pupils in the education system, as well as in extracurricular, leisure-time activities (Leonaitė et al., 2022). All municipalities in Lithuania are responsible for Roma children's education, healthcare, social welfare, and local cultural centres (Roma Community Center, 2019). The municipality of Vilnius stands out from other Lithuanian municipalities in consolidating the efforts of schools to ensure that Roma children experience the benefits of education, including non-formal education. It is one of the first municipalities in Lithuania to systematically address the welfare and education of Roma children and families. Roma Community Center (2019) notes that the municipality of Vilnius has actively implemented the first Roma integration strategies, which explains why this municipality was chosen for the study.

Methodology

A qualitative study was undertaken by collecting data through a semi-structured interview method. The primary objective of the qualitative interview process is to gather data that reflects the perspective of the participants and elucidates the purpose of the study (Gaižauskaitė & Valavičienė, 2016). Throughout the interviews, the researcher explored the understanding, attitudes, experiences, motives, and feelings of the study participants. The structure of the semi-structured questionnaire is flexible, enabling the researcher to manage the interview process by altering the wording of questions, the flow of questions, and asking additional questions as necessary. The study comprised eight individual interviews with social pedagogues in different schools in Vilnius, eleven interviews with Roma people (parents) raising school-age children, and three interviews with (NGO) workers who have been working with Roma pupils in recent years. The interviews were transcribed. The interview data were coded as follows: T - parents of Roma pupils; SP - social pedagogues; NGO - NGO workers. The data collected in the study are analysed using Content Analysis. The text analysed was obtained through semi-structured interviews. The texts were read several times, and subcategories and main categories were distinguished. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of study ethics: voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Limitations of the study include that it was conducted within the boundaries of Vilnius City municipality, so the results of the study reflect the situation of Roma children's participation in the education system in Vilnius City. The results presented in the paper are part of the study on the participation of Roma children in the education system in Vilnius, funded by the Vilnius City Council (No. 2ST-5 (17.19 E-451)).

Results

What are the experiences of Roma parents regarding their children's participation in non-formal education?

The content analysis of interviews with parents of Roma pupils highlighted the following categories: Benefits of non-formal education for pupils: enrichment of pupils' time, development of skills for future life, improvement of health; Limitations to participation in non-formal education: high cost and accessibility of non-formal education activities, lack of activities for pupils with special needs; Factors that encourage pupils to participate in non-formal education activities: pupils' enjoyment of the activity, rewards, attention from educators, positive relationship with the trainer.

Parents of Roma pupils recognise the benefits of non-formal education in terms of their children spending their time in a meaningful way, developing skills needed for future life, and strengthening their physical and emotional health:

"Good, different activities work well for him. Developing <...> enjoyment in doing them, maybe useful in the future"(T4). "Well, it's important for me that my girl participates in Roma concerts; she will learn and be able to teach other children something different..."(T7). According to the parents, sports activities in non-formal education clubs strengthened not only the child's physical health but also their motivation to participate in physical education classes at school: "The club was very successful - the child became stronger, the posture changed. For example, my schoolboy didn't do anything in physical education classes, he didn't do much, not even basic squats, or something like running, kicking a ball. He didn't really have those skills, and I avoided such activities. Now the change is happening; he is trying to participate in those classes and he is doing quite well" (T3). Limitations that parents of Roma pupils face in allowing their children to participate in non-formal education outside of school include the cost of these activities, the problem of accessibility, and the lack of activities for children with special needs: "There is nothing close to my home. I found it close but terribly expensive. It's not really possible for a child to take part because dancing takes up a lot of our family budget" (T5). One of the difficulties parents face when sending their children to non-formal education is geographical accessibility: "Then he wanted an art club, but I was looking for a place where it would be convenient for him to go himself, so I wouldn't have to go back to the city, take him, wait. I couldn't find it at first..."(T3). Parents experience a lack of non-formal education activities for children with special needs: "We can't find anyone who works with these children. We wanted to take our child to the swimming pool, and as far as we looked, they don't work with special children. It's hard to find; then we wanted to get gymnastics... but when they hear about a special child they say they haven't got a group <...> they say straight out that they don't work with special children. It's very difficult to find activities. And privately, of course, somewhere.... but that costs money too. So, I say, if the parents don't have the opportunity, the child doesn't get anything" (T6). Parents were happy to talk about the attractiveness of non-formal education activities for their children and their children's willingness to participate: "They would probably try all the clubs if they could. I think a child is hungry for excitement and entertainment, I would say. That is probably what he is now, that he wants everything and a lot"(T3), "She used to go to karate, she used to like it a lot"(T9). What motivates the children is a good relationship with the trainer: "Well, the child likes it very much, he really likes the trainer very much"(T7), " <...> because of the good relationship with the wrestling trainer, she also goes to wrestling twice a week"(T1). It is important for children participating in non-formal education activities to receive individual attention: "He likes it when attention is given to him, when it is explained to him, when he is communicated with, then he wants to go to that activity. He likes to be listened to, he likes to talk a lot and if he's not listened to, if he's not praised or whatever, that's it, he stops participating"(T4). Children are motivated to

participate in non-formal education activities through achievements and awards: *"So far, she has been wrestling, taking part in competitions, and has a pile of medals at home"*(T1).

What are the experiences of social pedagogues regarding the participation of pupils in non-formal education?

The analysis of interviews with school social pedagogues identified the following categories: active participation of primary school pupils in school events and after-school activities; avoidance of school events and after-school activities by secondary school pupils; participation of pupils in non-formal education activities inside and outside school is encouraged by meeting individual pupils' needs and by reimbursing financial costs.

School social pedagogues observe that Roma pupils in primary school are more actively involved in non-formal education activities or programmes than Roma pupils in upper grades: *"Primary school pupils, of course, have dances, they are in choirs at their school. We have an extra group for computer science, some of them attend, they like it, they like it. Well, you know, yes, and when we have events, concerts, they are really involved, they participate, they sing"*(SP1). Roma pupils in the upper classes only participate in school activities during lessons or breaks but avoid participating in non-formal education activities after school: *"If you invite pupils somewhere, they always ask if it is after or instead of classes. If it's after classes, it's not, but if it's instead, then yes"*(SP2). *"Teenagers don't want to go at all"*(SP4). Roma pupils go on school-organised educational excursions, with the school administration finding a way to pay for the travel costs: *"If there is an excursion organised, the child always goes on it, even if it is paid. It's usually the principal who finds some possibilities and pays for it"*(SP5). Social pedagogues help pupils to identify their individual interests and hobbies, motivate them to take part in different sporting activities, and find sponsors to fund the activity if it takes place outside school: *"I helped one of them through sport, he likes football and they didn't have the money. I contacted the president of the football association of that football, I asked him that there is a child, he wants to play football, but the family has no possibility to sponsor him, they have no money, I asked him what the possibility is to accept"*(SP3). However, *"...and the youngsters get, the less they participate in non-formal education clubs or groups"*(SP8).

What are the experiences of NGO workers regarding children's participation in non-formal education?

The NGOs' workers who participated in the study identified one of the key areas of activity as supporting and enabling Roma pupils' participation in non-formal education in every possible way: *"Participation in competitions is paid, travel is paid, staying there is paid. But we can provide such support if they are visitors to our centre"*(NGO1). They involve pupils in the organisation of activities, motivating them to take an interest in the history of the Roma people,

to value Roma traditions, to learn about the cultures of other countries and to gain new and valuable experiences. The NGO workers see non-formal education as a tool to motivate pupils, especially in the older classes, to go to school and learn: *"We buy all the materials, we pay for the competitions, but on the condition that we help and look for support if they go to school <...> what can we promise, you will come here, you will have lessons, you will participate in non-formal education, you will go to practice, you will play the guitar <...> and then there you will read, you will write - we will go on a trip in the summer"*(NGO3).

Non-formal education in the NGO is based on an equal relationship with the pupils: *"I think that non-formal education is our strength, which is very suitable for Roma children, not in the sense of being directive, but in the sense of being equal. So that kind of communication, that we don't forget each other and friendship and equality, I think that's also very helpful"*(NGO2). NGOs organise activities to preserve Roma identity and broaden the horizons of Roma pupils. Activities for Roma pupils are organised in a targeted way to preserve Roma identity, through trips and activities that stimulate interest in Roma history: *"It's about identity, so we've been very interested in this topic for a few years now, trying to get them interested in history <...> I mean how to preserve their memory, their identity, how to preserve everything"*(NGO2). Non-formal education aims to promote Roma traditions: *"Roma dances <...> and what we really see already is that some of the young people are ashamed to dance them and that it is a shame to wear these traditional Roma costumes. That is also something that we encourage very much. That's the most important thing, so that they don't turn away and are not ashamed to be Roma and to keep their traditions"*(NGO3). Non-formal education contributes to the preservation of the Roma language: *"In the spring, we organised a trip for pupils and the Roma we met told us how important it is to preserve their language and how important it is to speak it. And then <...> and they were really proud of their identity"*(NGO1). Non-formal education is seen as a means of promoting knowledge of the cultures and traditions of other countries: *"...pupils don't travel and have very little experience or exposure to other places. Give a person an idea of what he wants, but he hasn't seen what it could be like, he doesn't know what it was like, and he has a very narrow world of knowledge, he hasn't been anywhere, he hasn't seen anything. Non-formal education gives you new experiences. It gives them the experience that they can spend their free time in a different way because, well, really"*(NGO3).

Discussion

In order to strengthen the inclusion of Roma pupils in non-formal education, it is important to focus on providing opportunities and reducing the limitations experienced by pupils and their parents. Lithuanian education legislation stipulates that every school in the country should be allocated the necessary funds

to implement non-formal education for pupils (Survutaitė, 2023). Compulsory education is complemented and supplemented by non-formal education activities, which pupils are free to choose within the school environment, but access for Roma pupils is still not guaranteed. It is recognised that involvement in non-formal education engages Roma pupils and promotes their progress at school (Survutaitė, 2023), and this is confirmed by the parents of Roma pupils, social pedagogues, and NGO workers who participated in this study. Primary school pupils take part in school sports and arts activities because they are easily accessible, free, engaging, useful, promote physical health, and socialisation. However, Lithuanian researchers (Jevsejvienė et. al., 2022) observe that ethnic minority pupils at primary school level participate in non-formal education activities at school, but that participation decreases in the older group of pupils.

The social pedagogues participating in this study also noted that it is difficult to involve older Roma pupils in non-formal education at school or in after-school activities. On the other hand, when social pedagogues identify the individual interests and hobbies of pupils and find sponsors to pay for various sports, art activities, and educational trips, the motivation of young people to engage in non-formal education outside school increases. Social pedagogues recognise the importance of mobilising the school community to ensure the successful integration of Roma pupils by organising inclusive non-formal education events at school on topics related to different cultures and customs. The results of the study show the contribution of NGOs in providing social and educational support to Roma pupils and their families, and in finding opportunities for pupils to access non-formal education services in day-care centres and other non-formal education organisations in the municipality. This becomes a strong argument to motivate Roma teenagers who have learning difficulties and avoid attending classes to make progress in their education and complete the basic education programme up to grade 10. However, it is still observed that there is a tendency among Roma to complete only grades 7-8 of compulsory education (Department of National Minorities, 2022). For example, non-formal education in schools could be closely linked to non-formal education out of school, where schools, NGOs, and other organisations involved in non-formal education in the municipality could work together to create a broad network of non-formal education services in multicultural settings, enabling Roma pupils, especially those who are excluded, to integrate seamlessly into the education system. It should be noted that in the education of Roma pupils, socially just education is achieved by recognising cultural diversity, increasing access to education, including non-formal education, supporting Roma inclusion and socialisation, and building a positive image of minority cultures (Carrera, Rostas, & Vosyliūtė, 2017). This study has highlighted the limitations that hinder the access of Roma pupils with special educational needs to non-formal education services. Parents noted that their children with special educational needs do not have access to non-formal education activities

close to home or at school, or that the cost of the activities is too high and cannot be financed from the family budget. Parents find it difficult to find a non-formal education teacher or trainer who is willing to personalise or adapt a programme of activities for a child with special needs. For some Roma children, special educational needs due to health problems or disabilities become apparent in primary education. In such cases, the general education curriculum is adapted and individualised, taking into account the identified special educational needs of the pupil, as well as the wishes of the pupil and the parents, and in accordance with the findings and recommendations of the Educational Psychological Service (Survutaitè, 2023), while non-formal education is left to self-development or within the scope of the parents' possibilities and interests. Knowing this, it is possible to develop potential school opportunities to link formal and non-formal education beyond the school environment.

Conclusions

Schools, NGOs, and other non-formal education institutions are working to ensure that Roma pupils have access to non-formal education. Ensuring pupils' participation in non-formal education in the long term is linked to the diversity and coordination of educational activities within the school, cooperation with a network of non-formal education organisations outside the school with a multicultural background. This collaboration aims to help Roma pupils overcome the difficulties they face in life and in the learning process, socialise, and integrate into the education system. Parents of Roma pupils recognise the benefits of non-formal education and associate it with the development of skills needed for their children's future success. However, they experience limitations or a lack of availability of non-formal education for children with special needs, issues related to the accessibility of services, and the possibility of financing it from the family budget. School social pedagogues strive to ensure that Roma pupils in primary school have the opportunity to participate in non-formal education activities or programmes in the school environment. However, teenagers tend not to be involved in non-formal education in school. The motivation of teenagers to participate in out-of-school non-formal education activities is increased by identifying the individual needs of the pupil and finding sponsors. NGO workers not only support and involve Roma children in non-formal education activities but also have the ability to enhance their motivation to attend school and integrate into the education system in the long term.

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