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Romani students and their relationship with school: perspectives from an educational community

Alunos ciganos e sua relação com a escola: perspectivas de uma comunidade educativa

Alumnos gitanos y su relación con la escuela: perspectivas de una comunidad educativa

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Resumo

Este artigo apresenta os resultados de uma pesquisa cujo objetivo foi compreender como os atores de uma comunidade educativa percebem os alunos ciganos e a relação desses alunos com a escola. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa realizada em uma escola pública de Guapó (GO), por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com seis professores, dois coordenadores pedagógicos e três mães ciganas. A análise de conteúdo revelou múltiplos desafios à inclusão escolar, como o desconhecimento da cultura cigana por parte dos profissionais da educação, a invisibilidade dos alunos, a infrequência

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escolar, a reprodução de estereótipos e de práticas discriminatórias, além da fragilidade do vínculo entre a escola e a família. Conclui-se que a efetivação do direito à educação para alunos ciganos requer formação intercultural dos profissionais que atuam na escola, a implementação de políticas públicas específicas e o desenvolvimento de práticas pedagógicas que valorizem a diversidade cultural. Somente por meio de uma abordagem que reconheça as identidades do povo cigano, enfrente as práticas discriminatórias e construa um ambiente escolar que promova o pertencimento, a escuta e o respeito mútuo, será possível garantir que a escola cumpra seu papel como espaço de aprendizagem e de justiça social para crianças ciganas, historicamente invisibilizadas no cenário educacional brasileiro.

Palavras-chave: Inclusão escolar. Cultura cigana. Aluno cigano. Diversidade. Educação intercultural.

Abstract

This article presents the results of a study aimed at understanding how members of an educational community perceive Romani students and their relationship with the school. This qualitative study was conducted in a public school in Guapó (GO), through semi-structured interviews with six teachers, two pedagogical coordinators, and three Romani mothers. The content analysis revealed multiple challenges to school inclusion, such as a lack of knowledge of Romani culture among education professionals, the invisibility of students, infrequent school attendance, the reproduction of stereotypes and discriminatory practices, and the fragility of the bond between school and family. It is concluded that realizing the right to education for Romani children in the early years of elementary school requires intercultural training for school professionals, the implementation of specific public policies, and the development of pedagogical practices that value cultural diversity. "Only through an approach that acknowledges the identities of the Romani people, confronts discriminatory practices, and fosters a school environment that promotes belonging, active listening, and mutual respect will it be possible to ensure that schools fulfill their role as spaces of learning and social justice for Romani children, who have been historically marginalized in the Brazilian educational landscape.

Keywords: School inclusion; Romani culture; Romani student; Diversity; Intercultural education.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación cuyo objetivo fue comprender cómo los actores de una comunidad educativa perciben a los alumnos gitanos y su relación con la escuela. Se trata de un estudio cualitativo realizado en una escuela pública de Guapó (GO), mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas con seis docentes, dos coordinadores pedagógicos y tres madres gitanas. El análisis de contenido reveló múltiples desafíos para la inclusión escolar, como el desconocimiento de la cultura gitana por parte de los profesionales de la educación, la invisibilidad de los estudiantes, la baja asistencia escolar, la reproducción de estereotipos y de prácticas discriminatorias, así como la fragilidad del vínculo entre la escuela y la familia. Se concluye que la garantía del derecho a la educación de niñas y niños gitanos en los primeros años de la educación primaria requiere la formación intercultural para los profesionales que trabajan en la escuela, la implementación de políticas públicas específicas y el desarrollo de prácticas pedagógicas que valoren la diversidad cultural. Solo a través de un enfoque que reconozca las identidades del pueblo gitano, enfrente las prácticas discriminatorias y promueva un ambiente escolar basado en el sentido de pertenencia, la escucha y el respeto mutuo, será posible asegurar que la escuela cumpla su papel como espacio de aprendizaje y de justicia social para los niños y niñas gitanos, históricamente invisibilizados en el escenario educativo brasileño.

Palabras clave: Inclusión escolar. Cultura gitana. Alumno gitano. Diversidad. Educación intercultural.

1. Introduction

Despite progress in safeguarding constitutional rights and implementing public policies to promote diversity, many challenges remain in providing inclusive education for Romani children in the early years of elementary school. Decree No. 6040, dated February 7, 2007, states that traditional peoples and communities, such as the Romani, recognize themselves as culturally distinct. These groups possess "their own forms of social organization, which occupy and use territories and natural resources as a condition for their cultural, social, religious, ancestral, and economic reproduction, utilizing knowledge, innovations, and practices generated and transmitted through tradition" (Brazil, 2007).

Romani culture exhibits unique characteristics in many areas, and respecting these traits is necessary for schools to function as inclusive spaces that embrace diversity and affirm Romani children's identities in educational settings. This approach is essential to addressing episodes of discrimination, exclusion, and social invisibility that have plagued this group since the 14th century.

Historical records point to events that occurred in Switzerland in 1471, on the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, and during the Christian Reconquista from 1558 to 1603. Additionally, there was slavery in the Balkans until the 19th century. It is also important to mention the extermination policy implemented against the Romani during World War II. This policy resulted in the deportation of over 23,000 Romani families to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where they were subjected to inhumane conditions (Sambati, 2015).

The historical exclusion of the Romani people is still evident today. According to a report by the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (Brazil, 2020, p. 7), although the Romani are guaranteed constitutional, economic, social, and cultural rights, many still encounter invisibility and remain unregistered and unprotected. They also face policies that do not promote inclusion and, in some cases, are openly discriminatory.

The 1988 Federal Constitution, by guaranteeing rights for ethnic minorities, marked an important step forward in the inclusion of Romani communities. Furthermore, the 1990 Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA) reinforces the absolute priority of children's and adolescents' rights, ensuring Romani children have access to education, healthcare, and a dignified life. However, although Law No. 9,394 of 1996 (LDB) provides for equal access to and retention in school, its effectiveness is compromised by the lack of alignment between the school curriculum and the cultural realities of these communities, as Dantas (2020) asserts. This hinders the full inclusion of Romani children and adolescents in the educational system.

Recognizing the importance of Romani people's access to and inclusion in formal education, this article presents findings from a Professional Master's in Education study examining how educational community stakeholders perceive Romani students and their relationship with the school.

Inclusion and Social Justice in Schools

Given the complexity of these concepts and their evolution over time, defining social justice and inclusion is challenging. Estêvão (2001, 2016) explains that the narrative of social justice, as a means of reducing social and educational inequalities, has historically been subject to varied and conflicting interpretations. The idea of inclusion has come to extend beyond students with disabilities. An inclusive school, as a policy of social justice, presupposes a broad concept of inclusion that encompasses not only students with disabilities or those who are gifted, but also linguistic, ethnic, or cultural minorities, marginalized groups, and students from disadvantaged areas.

However, Azevedo (2013) argues that simply welcoming all students is not enough to guarantee social justice. The author explains that a school may comply with the law and offer equal opportunities yet still be unjust if it fails to meet each student's specific needs. In this sense, educational justice requires that each student receive what is necessary for their full development, implying an ethical approach sensitive to inequalities. Azevedo also criticizes the standardized, rigid pedagogical model that perpetuates and intensifies social inequalities. She proposes moral justice, which welcomes all students and offers more opportunities to the disadvantaged. This approach focuses on creating a learning environment that respects diversity and promotes human development.

Both Dubet (2004) and Crahay (2013) expand the scope of the debate by asserting that schools not only experience the consequences of social inequalities, but also perpetuate them. Dubet (2004) argues that a just school should be an agent of transformation, adopting measures such as quotas, academic support, and cultural activities to compensate for inequalities. However, according to Dubet, these actions face resistance from proponents of the traditional meritocratic model and have limited impact because the groups most affected by inequalities lack the power to assert their rights.

Crahay (2013) presents an ethical debate on the three fundamental principles of justice and analyzes how schools can promote a more equitable approach. These principles include distributive, commutative, and corrective justice. He also explores three conceptions of equality in pedagogy: equality of treatment, equality of opportunity, and equality of outcomes. According to the author, the first conception of equality reflects egalitarian justice, ensuring all students have access to the same quality educational content. However, advocates of equality of attainment argue for allocating more resources to students who are less advantaged, both intellectually and culturally. This approach aims to provide everyone with the opportunity to acquire the essential skills needed to thrive in contemporary society.

An inclusive school creates conditions that allow students, regardless of their backgrounds, cultures, or needs, to actively participate in the educational process. Valuing differences enriches social interaction and learning, fostering an environment in which each individual feels welcomed, respected, and encouraged to grow.

Education systems must commit to developing policies and practices that effectively address the distinct characteristics, potential, and needs of a diverse student body. According to Pereira (2011), many Romani communities, especially those living in poverty and facing social exclusion, perceive school as hostile to their culture. This perception is reinforced by experiences of prejudice and ignorance on the part of the school community. The lack of formal records on Romani people, as noted by Machado, Martins, and Silva (2017), contributes to their invisibility in educational censuses and, consequently, to the absence of specific public policies. Rodrigues and Olanda (2020) emphasize the importance of integrating Romani culture into the diversity and inclusion debate. Social justice in schools will only be effective when diversity is recognized as a value, and all students—including those belonging to ethnic minorities—are guaranteed the right to learn with dignity, respect, and equity. Silva Filho (2022) warns of the influence of whiteness as a dominant cultural norm that silences and marginalizes other identities under the guise of formal equality. He emphasizes that schools must promote a sense of ethnic belonging and respect the cultural expressions of all groups, including Romani people.

Methodology

This qualitative, basic, exploratory study aims to understand how educational community stakeholders perceive Romani students and their relationship with school. Field research was conducted at a public school near a Romani community that has recently enrolled students from this group. The school is located in the municipality of Guapó in the state of Goiás. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews informed by the relevant literature and the study's general and specific objectives. To ensure the quality of information obtained from administrative staff, professors, and family members of Romani children, specific scripts were developed for each group of interviewees to understand better their perspectives, challenges, expectations, and suggestions regarding the inclusion of Romani students in schools.

Three Romani mothers whose children were enrolled at the school at the time of data collection participated in the interviews[1], as did six professors who had taught at the school for at least three years and two instructional coordinators who had worked there for more than three years. The Romani mothers, the coordinators, and four professors were interviewed in person at locations and times of their choosing. Two professors, who also work in other municipalities, were interviewed via Zoom in the evening, as it was the only available time. Interviews with the coordinators, professors, and Romani mothers were recorded to allow for systematic data analysis. Additionally, a

[1] Data collection began after approval by the Ethics Committee (CAAE: 76216323.9.0000.5377) and was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of current legislation (Brazil, 2016).

demographic questionnaire was sent to professors and educational coordinators to collect information such as age, academic background, and professional experience.

The interview with the Romani mothers required specific methodological precautions. When the researcher arrived at the camp, several people greeted them, making it impossible to interview in private. This resulted in constant interruptions and interference. At certain points, the husbands of two of the interviewed mothers participated and occasionally intervened. Furthermore, especially at the beginning, some residents advised the interviewees not to speak out, revealing a fear of possible reprisals, particularly from the school. Therefore, it was necessary to repeatedly reaffirm the information's confidentiality. Initially, the responses were neutral; however, as the conversation progressed and the mothers shared concrete experiences, their perceptions and positions on the discussed topics became evident.

To protect the participants' identities, fictitious names were used. The three Romani mothers interviewed, aged 29 to 32, were identified as Jade Kalin, Esmeralda Calon, and Natasha Anakleyde—names chosen for their traditional Romani roots. The pedagogical coordinators, Dara (54) and Apolo (47), as well as professors Davi, Ester, Sara, Estevão, Moisés, and Rebeca (aged 29 to 52), have worked at the institution for more than three years. Four teachers have between five and eight years of experience, while two have 25 years of combined experience.

All collected data were analyzed using content analysis. After conducting skimming readings, relevant information was highlighted using a color-coding system to identify central ideas in each interview group: mothers, professors, and educational coordinators. The colors represented different themes: red for academic performance, green for absenteeism and dropout rates, brown for cultural issues within the Romani community, orange for inclusion and exclusion in school, purple for the relationship between Romani children and school, gray for parents' views on the importance of education, and blue for the relationship between parents and school. The data were organized in a spreadsheet by color and theme, which revealed two thematic axes and their respective categories, as presented in the following text.

Key Findings

Key aspects of how members of an educational community perceive Romani students and their relationship with school were organized into two thematic areas: Romani culture and Romani students in school.

Romani culture

During the interviews, two aspects stood out: the *lack of knowledge about Romani culture among teachers and educational coordinators* and, consequently, their *strangeness toward that culture*.

According to Moreira (2023), the *lack of knowledge about Romani culture* among school professionals reflects insufficient training and ineffective inclusive educational policies. For the author, this gap is evident in curricula and didactic materials, which ignore Romani cultural specificities, hindering communication between teachers and students. The statements by professors Davi and Moisés illustrate this lack of knowledge:

> [...] I didn't even know there was a Romani community in the state of Goiás. I'd heard about it; I had a stereotype, a mental picture, an image of Romani culture, but I didn't know anything about it, and even today I'd say I don't know how to work with them. (Davi, Professor)

> [...] I'd only heard about it; I'd never had any interaction or contact with students, nor had I had any contact with Romani people at all. [...]. (Moisés, Professor)

In their statements, the teachers highlight a lack of knowledge not only about Romani culture but also about the very existence of these communities in the state. As noted by Leinster and Fanti (2021), the difficulties arising from a lack of knowledge of this people's culture and traditions result in a deep divide between distinct cultural worlds.

Consequently, the specific characteristics of Romani culture are often overlooked or misunderstood, leading to feelings of alienation, as can be seen in the following accounts:

> [...] it's the way they view their lives, their dreams, and their thoughts about the future—because it's completely different from what we want for our own children. Because you think you have a child, you want them to go to school and be independent. There's a culture that encourages education, whereas the Romani people have a completely different perspective. (Rebeca, Professor).

> From what I know about them, they don't have a culture that allows them to take pleasure in their studies—unless I'm mistaken, and please correct me if I'm wrong—they don't come from a literate culture, and they don't feel comfortable in a school setting. [...] perhaps the very structure of the school system makes them feel out of place [...] (Apolo, Educational Coordinator for 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades)

These statements reflect the limited familiarity that the teacher and the pedagogical coordinator have with Romani culture. For example, Professor Davi says he thinks of Romani people as wearing "those different clothes," and as women who read palms and are considered cheaters. Pedagogical Coordinator Dara also acknowledges the lack of knowledge about Romani culture: "There's a great lack of knowledge about the Romani people. We're unfamiliar with their culture and way of life. What we do know is what we've heard from one person or another."

These statements should not be interpreted as personal ignorance but rather as symptoms of an educational system that still does not fully recognize ethnic and cultural diversity as a cornerstone of pedagogical practice. A lack of continuing training on "minority cultures," such as Romani culture, hinders the development of intercultural education.

Since Romani culture is not widely known in Brazilian society, topics such as early marriage, specific forms of communication, and high school dropout rates often seem strange not only in the school setting, but also to the general public. According to Casa Nova (2006), a lack of understanding of aspects such as oral knowledge transmission, flexible schedules, and strong community interaction can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations about Romani children. It is important to emphasize that this sense of strangeness is mutual. For Romani families, the culture of non-Romani people features practices and values that are also foreign to them. For the author, school is a space where cultural identities are constantly shaped and negotiated. When there are signs of disrespect or a threat to Romani culture, the reaction tends to be intense, fueling the fear that their customs will be devalued or erased. In this regard, Natacha, a mother, comments:

> [...] Well, my dear, we don't look down on anyone—we accept everyone—but the thing is, some people are gradually abandoning our customs, the girls are becoming more liberal, and the true Romani people are disappearing. [...]. (Natacha Anakleide, Romani mother).

Pinto and Oliveira (2016) recommend that professors take a step back to reflect critically on their practices and biases. This involves questioning whether they truly understand Romani culture and examining whether stereotypes and biases influence their teaching approaches. Only after this reflection can teachers ensure that they are not harming this different culture and that Romani students feel safe, knowing their culture is respected and valued.

According to Moreira (2023), many Romani people believe that conventional schools do not take into account their reality or culture, as the curriculum disregards their aspirations and way of life. They believe that practical learning, acquired through trades and commerce, is more valuable than theoretical knowledge gained in school. This perception underscores the importance of schools recognizing the unique needs of Romani students and developing strategies to support them better. This issue was highlighted in interviews with teachers and coordinators who offered suggestions for improving the school's support:

> [...] For example, we could explore some traditional games from Romani culture. [...] We need to show that different cultures can interact. I think the school could bring an understanding of how Romani culture actually works and its main aspects into the classroom. (Moises, professor).

Professor Ester agrees with her colleague's statement and adds that one should:

> Bring more of their reality into school activities. I believe that in education, if we don't know the individual—if we don't understand their culture, what they think, or what they aspire to—there's no way to address their specific needs. I believe that working with these children requires specific training, just as we have for the Quilombola and Indigenous communities. (Ester—professor).

Hence the need for educational practices that promote not only recognition and tolerance, but also respect, coexistence, and genuine dialogue with diversity (Casa Nova, 2006). This is a daily, ongoing effort.

Romani Students in School

When discussing Romani students in school, it is important to consider that they are raised in contexts characterized by freedom and active participation in their families' economic and social activities. This situation contrasts with the conventional educational model, which is characterized by hierarchy, fixed schedules, and set deadlines. These factors make adapting to school particularly challenging (Ferreira, 2023).

Within this thematic area, four categories were identified and analyzed: the invisibility of Romani students, school non-attendance, monitoring of Romani students' school life, and discriminatory practices and stereotypes experienced by Romani students.

One of the first aspects that stood out in the dataset was the invisibility of Romani students, as seen in the following statements:

> [...] That's when I found out I had Romani students in my class, because when I asked why the students had been absent from school for so many days, that's when they told me he was Romani; until then, I didn't even know there were people from that ethnic group in my class. (Davi, professor).

> [...] I was told there were Romani children much later [...] the school didn't report it to me; they didn't tell me anything about it. So, the school is at fault in this regard; it needs to be prepared to welcome these children, given that children from this community are common in the school. (Estevão, professor).

All the teachers interviewed reported that they had not been informed of the presence of Romani students enrolled at the school, even though the school is located near one of these communities. At the time of data collection, the school had no projects or initiatives planned to welcome these students and their families.

When school administrators and professors are unaware of Romani students' presence, these students become invisible in the daily school routine. Consequently, no measures are taken to welcome them, nor are teaching strategies adapted to account for their cultural specificities. Although Brazilian law recognizes the importance of differentiated teaching practices to address diversity, including that of Romani students, many schools are still not prepared to guarantee this right. Regarding this issue, Professor Estevão offered relevant insights when asked.

> [...] Because, you see, if there are no practices geared toward them, there is no inclusion, and here we would have to open a debate on inclusion, equality, and equity. But the truth is that even if they are there—and they are different—they are not seen; they exist in invisibility, and their culture is neither highlighted nor addressed. So I strongly assert that yes, the school is not fulfilling its role. [...] I attribute this to a lack of knowledge [...] because if knowledge is not followed by change, it constitutes a restriction of rights.

Professor Estevão's remarks highlight a crucial point: the implications of a lack of knowledge about Romani culture in the school setting. The failure to implement pedagogical practices that respect and value these students' identities constitutes a form of educational discrimination. Such an omission violates the principles of equality and inclusion guaranteed by the Federal Constitution and by Brazilian education guidelines.

To understand the school administration's perspective, the pedagogical coordinators were asked about the procedures used to identify Romani students—whether this information was obtained at the time of enrollment and whether there was any knowledge regarding the number of Romani students enrolled at the institution:

> [...] when the child or their guardians speak up, the coordinator immediately passes the information on to the professor; however, the guardians must report it to the school office. If it isn't reported, we have no way of knowing whether or not it's true. (Apolo, academic coordinator).

To better understand how enrollment was handled and whether a student of Romani ethnicity could conceal their background—given that there was no way to identify them—the question was raised: how could the school identify these students? In this regard, the coordinator explained that:

> Usually, the girls in the school office notice it from their clothing and the way they present themselves. They don't ask whether or not they're gypsies, but that's what we've observed. As for children who don't identify as gypsies, there have indeed been cases where we only found out midway through the school year that a child was a Romani, because they hadn't mentioned anything. (Apolo, educational coordinator).

The lack of an institutional protocol for recording ethnic identity at the time of enrollment undermines the effectiveness of inclusion policies. The identification of Romani students depends on either self-identification by families or on staff's subjective perceptions, often based on stereotypes. This reinforces stigmas and can lead to the invisibility of students who fear discrimination. By shifting responsibility to families, the school neglects its role in establishing formal identification mechanisms, which are essential for producing reliable data and educational planning.

Another recurring theme in the interviews concerns the *low school attendance rates among Romani students*, which directly affects their performance. In this regard, professors report:

> [...] There was even one child whom I didn't meet until 45 days had passed. So, I knew he was enrolled in that class with me—he was my student—but I didn't know him. It took 45 days to meet him. (Davi, professor).

> [...] He missed a lot of school—about 15 days in a row, maybe even more than that. And so, in that sense, I think he was falling behind. Among the other students I've had—I've had a couple of others as well—there were a couple who were also frequent absentees. I had to go out of my way to track them down actively. (Ester, professor).

It is important to note that this absence goes beyond occasional absences: it involves cultural, emotional, and institutional factors. And school absenteeism among Romani children is usually accompanied by an additional phenomenon: the excuses parents give the school to explain their children's absences. It is common for them to cite travel, commuting, or health problems. This issue is illustrated in the accounts of teachers and instructional coordinators, as shown below.

> [...] I don't know why they lied. Everyone here knows them and knows they have a permanent address, so they don't travel that much; I can't tell you if it's part of their culture. (Davi, professor).

> [...] they say they're sick just to skip class. They make up way too many, too many, too many excuses... They don't tell the truth. They're very clever. (Sara, professor).

> What we see is exactly what I mentioned: poor attendance and some stories we sometimes hear from the parents—stories that aren't true. I don't know what they're trying to hide, or what they're afraid of—I just don't know. (Dara, academic coordinator).

According to teachers and coordinators, these excuses have become routine, and they are unable to explain why families supposedly withhold the truth. When they try to do so, their interpretations often reveal value judgments.

To understand the causes of high school absenteeism among Romani students in this community, the mothers were asked about the reasons for their children's frequent absences. In response, they gave the same excuses they

provide to the school. One of them stated: “It’s when we go away, right? We travel to take care of business, and then he skips class [...]” (Esmeralda Calon, mother of a Romani student). As she was speaking, her husband intervened, adding: “No, professor, it’s just that she’s afraid to speak up. She doesn’t always travel with me” (Esmeralda Calon’s husband). And as the interview progressed and the parents became more comfortable with the interview process, they revealed the real reason for their children’s absences:

> [...] He doesn't want to study, professor, but he doesn't say anything. It's just that he says he doesn't like school—they laugh at him [...] (Natacha Nakleide, mother of Romani students).

> [...] it’s just that, a lot of the time, the boys really don’t want to go to school. Sometimes they just don’t like it. They say it’s bad [...] (Esmeralda Calon’s husband).

These statements corroborate the findings of Casa Nova (2006), who discusses the false justifications given by Romani families for students’ absences from school, emphasizing that teachers and other professionals often fail to recognize that, in the Romani community, lying is a survival strategy. According to the author, the practice of providing misleading justifications for school absenteeism reflects a series of underlying dynamics, including the need to protect the family’s cultural identity, a lack of understanding or adaptation to school norms, and the desire to avoid potential sanctions or criticism from the educational institution. However, this does not mean that Romani families do not value formal schooling:

> [...] It’s important, isn’t it, my daughter? School is important because it provides everything—an education, right? It leads to jobs; it helps you get ahead. People who can’t read or write don’t have decent jobs; we have to get an education. We can’t go without it. (Natacha Anakleide, mother of Romani students).

> [...] Learning to read, learning to write. Leaving school knowing something. Getting a job at a store, a pharmacy, a bakery, or a gas station. To work, right? Yeah, to work—in today’s world, you have to work—so if she knows how, she can find a job. (Jade Kalin, mother of Romani students).

These accounts demonstrate that the interviewed mothers recognize the importance of formal education for their children’s future. They understand that schooling is essential for improving living conditions and promoting social mobility. However, several factors hinder these students’ attendance and retention at school, such as the children’s reluctance to attend.

The mothers reported that their children cry upon arrival at school, cling to their legs, and show signs of distress. Jade, one of the mothers, posed the following question: "Would you leave your son crying at school with people he doesn't like?" Esmeralda Calon also discusses how she addresses her son’s refusal to attend classes.

> They spend a lot of time with us, and I like being around him—he’s well taken care of, right? But sometimes I say, “Son, you have to go to school.” He says, “No, Mom, I don’t want to go today…” Sometimes he cries, right? Then we feel sorry for him. (Esmeralda Calon, mother of a Romani student).

It was observed that mothers tend not to confront children who resist going to school. According to Leistner and Fanti (2021), these families view school as a threat to their children’s identity. They fear that the school experience will distance their children from their roots and customs. This view may contribute to high school dropout and non-enrollment rates among Romani students (Cardoso & Bonomo, 2019). Two main factors explain this behavior: parental attachment and concerns about how their children are treated at school.

Mothers were asked about the school’s stance on absences to determine if the institution was actively addressing the issue. In response, the parents stated

> Professor, to tell you the truth, sometimes we don’t say anything, and we just leave. But they don’t care either; they say they’ll call, but they never do. I don’t know if it’s because we’re Romani, but at parent-teacher conferences,

> they say they'll call us when our child is absent, but they never do. But we've asked the kids to let us know—it's hard not to—but sometimes I think they just forget (Esmeralda Calon, mother of a Romani student).

In this regard, Apolo, the institution's coordinator, stated:

> We reach out to the family to emphasize the importance of their child being in school. In some cases, we even visit the family's home to find out why the child has been missing school. As a last resort, we report any situations we've been unable to resolve to the school board and the relevant authorities (Apolo, educational coordinator).

Jade Kalin's husband said during the interview that the school, in a conversation with them, threatened to call the child welfare agency. The father said he was waiting for that visit, but it never happened, and he added:

> [...] I wanted them to come over so I could talk to her, to scare her a little so she'd go. She said at school, "Let's have the Child Protective Services come over." Okay, I waited, and to this day, nothing. And I want them to come... maybe she'll go if they show up; sometimes she'll go—it scares her a little, and she changes her attitude. [...] I wanted them to come over to talk, to see for themselves. When they said they were coming, I even stayed home for a few days so I wouldn't be here when she was alone, you know? Since she's afraid, but he never showed up at all. (Husband of Jade Kalin, father of Romani students).

Jade Kalin's husband's remarks reveal tensions and contradictions that warrant analysis, particularly concerning the relationship between Romani families and the school. The father states that intervention by the child welfare board would be desirable because it would persuade his daughter to attend school. Here, we see an ambiguous perspective: despite his mistrust, the father expects the school to fulfill its role of actively seeking out students. His frustration with the board's absence highlights a perception of institutional neglect and the Romani community's invisibility. Professor Rebeca argues that the school should not give up and should persist in ensuring the Roma student's attendance. She justifies her statement with the following argument:

> [...] We can't just wait for the family to reach out to us about this, because they won't. So, I believe the school should take the initiative because, right now, it instills awareness of the importance of education and should try to facilitate interaction between cultures. But if there's no interest, it won't work. One side ends up waiting for the other. Action must be taken (Rebeca, professor).

This statement recognizes the important role of schools in the inclusion of Romani students, acknowledging that, given social and cultural conditions, schools often need to take the lead in promoting education and facilitating cross-cultural interaction. The professor argues that to ensure Romani students attend school, the school must continuously engage with families and guarantee access to knowledge, regardless of the challenges.

Another issue raised by the interviewees is the monitoring of Romani students' school life. When asked about their interactions with the school and their monitoring of their children's learning, the mothers of Romani students reported having little presence in the school environment. They explained this as follows:

> [...] I've been once. [...] I don't go to the meetings anymore—they look at us funny" (Natacha Anakleyde, mother of a Romani student).

> [...] Well, professor, every time we go there, they speak badly about the boys and complain about us, so when there are these meetings, we don't even take the boys with us—so that we don't have to hear that stuff. That's not necessary, is it? It's humiliating, isn't it?! They say it right in front of others—it's awful; it just shouldn't happen. (Jade Kalin, mother of a Romani student).

It is evident from the mothers' statements that they often feel out of place when confronted with awkward stares and negative attitudes from some members of the school community. Furthermore, for these families, the practice of publicly exposing students' difficulties during parent-teacher meetings is considered disrespectful, in light of the values of Romani culture.

When asked about the presence of Romani parents in the school environment, teachers and the academic coordination team reported:

> [...] but every time I've had Romani students, their parents don't really care much about the child's learning at school; they don't place much importance on it. (Sara, Professor).

> [...] Roma families don't really have that kind of support. They have a different view of time, of what they have to do, of their daily chores [...] they didn't make an effort to ensure the child's healthy development; it was clear that school wasn't important to them (Rebeca, professor).

Comments from mothers and professors highlight a disconnect between Romani families' and the school's understanding of parental involvement. The mothers describe embarrassing experiences marked by disrespect and judgment. Therefore, in these cases, the absence of families is not simply negligence, but rather a response to exclusion. The statements by professors Sara and Rebeca also reveal a stereotypical and reductionist view that attributes a lack of interest in formal education to Romani culture. This underscores the importance of considering symbolic factors hindering family participation, such as a lack of welcoming strategies and prejudice among school staff. Professor Davi offers the following clarification based on the perception that Romani families show a lack of interest in matters related to their children's education:

> [...] So, during the year I worked with them, I fell a little short in that regard, because I didn't talk to the family or call them in—even though the child wasn't attending regularly—because there's a stigma, right? A Romani child—that's fine, it's okay. Every time I mentioned the Romani child, people would say there was no point in following up, so I just let it go, but I never called any of the mothers in to talk. (Davi, Professor).

This statement illustrates how stereotypes can lead teachers to overlook Romani students' infrequent attendance, hindering the relationship between families and the school. Casa Nova (2006) explains this apparent lack of interest in school among the Romani community, arguing that it is not a matter of rejection but rather reflects that education has not yet been meaningfully incorporated into their daily routines. The author claims that the Romani community's attitudes toward education are deeply rooted in their ethnic habitus, which is formed during primary socialization. This habitus leads them to perceive school as a foreign environment.

This limited view of Romani families' role in their children's education tends to blame the families for students' failure or absenteeism. This tendency ignores the difficulties Romani families experience in school, such as institutional prejudice and a lack of welcoming strategies and cultural mediation. It is important to remember that family involvement cannot be measured by attendance at school meetings or the ability to help with homework. In many cases, support is provided through care and encouragement, which the school does not highly value.

It is important to note that mothers express doubts about teachers' preparedness to work with Romani students.

> [...] I think they don't know how to teach Romani children—that Romani children are different. (Jade Kalin's husband, father of Romani students).

> [...] they lack education and patience with the children [...] you know what's embarrassing, professor? It's that none of our boys here know how to put those letters together—they can't read. What's going on? [...]. (Esmeralda Calon, mother of Romani students).

These statements reveal that families are skeptical about professors' sensitivity to their children's specific needs, especially cultural ones. The mother's concern highlights the school's struggle to guarantee these students' right to literacy, which may be related to a lack of inclusive teaching practices.

Apolo, the educational coordinator, notes that Brazilian law recognizes education as a right and advocates for public policies that encourage Romani children to stay in school, ensuring they can fully exercise their rights.

> [...] We would need public policies, awareness campaigns, and educational initiatives so that these communities and parents would be aware of these possibilities and could hold the government accountable. [...] So I believe the first step is to raise awareness that education is very important for their sons and daughters, and this, of course, must come from the government (Apolo, educational coordinator).

Apolo's remarks emphasize the importance of the state and schools ensuring the right to education for Romani children. This includes combating cultural homogenization and developing strategies to welcome them. Family participation will increase when families realize that schools are organizing themselves and preparing their staff to welcome Romani students.

Finally, the statements, particularly those of the mothers, reveal another aspect: the stereotypes and discriminatory practices experienced by Romani students. The Romani population faces considerable discrimination and prejudice in many countries. For example, the stereotypical image of itinerant people living in precarious conditions obscures the reality of many settled and successful Romani people. This leads to the concealment of their origins, a practice that begins in childhood. According to Professor Sara, her students "were ashamed to say they were Roma. They spent the school year hiding the fact that they were Roma" (Professor Sara, 2024).

Throughout the interviews, professors and academic coordinators were asked about discrimination and prejudice against Romani students in the school environment. Some denied having witnessed such incidents, while others admitted to observing them but claimed they were isolated occurrences. Some considered it unethical to comment on the behavior of other professionals or students regarding these issues.

> [...] Look, we've heard a lot of things that aren't appropriate to report... for ethical reasons (Apolo, educational coordinator).

> [...] In my own experience, at least, I haven't seen this as a common practice. (Moisés, professor).

> [...] No, at least at our school, there isn't that kind of exclusion against Roma people (Dara, educational coordinator).

Professors who acknowledged having witnessed acts of prejudice and racism directed at Romani children—both by classmates and by other teachers—reported the following:

> One day at a faculty meeting, someone said they weren't going to get involved with the "Romani" situation because they kill for fun. We hear all kinds of things, each one harder to understand than the last. I even heard a professor joke that he wanted to pass his Romani student off to another professor. The other professor said he didn't want him, and so on. (Davi, professor)

> There's even bullying against them. They were always picked on, so they fought back. The boys would say things to them. Something like that was always happening. They'd talk about Romani people, call them "little Gypsies," and say they lived in tents (Sara, professor). (Sara, professor).

> [...] We see that the children are sometimes labeled. The other children notice that they're different, but of course, in some circumstances, these labels exist, and the children are treated differently. Some classmates call these children "little Gypsies," "dirty," and use harsher language. They say that Gypsies steal, cheat, and lie. Some professors said that there's no need to follow up on absences because Gypsies don't do their assignments anyway and don't like to study (Apolo, educational coordinator).

The statements reveal that prejudice is often not confronted but rather normalized in everyday school life. Viewing Romani students as "problems"—and believing it is not worth investing in their education—demonstrates an institutional culture of tolerance for prejudice, in which racism is trivialized.

Unanimously, professors report that during recess, Romani students tend to gather in a specific area of the school and stay together, as described below:

> [...] I've noticed that they tend to stick together during recess. I don't know if it's part of their culture. But I see that they're always together—you can really tell they're close. (Ester, professor).

> [...] I noticed that during recess, the Roma students interacted with each other; they would leave the classroom at recess and stay together. And the students who weren't Roma didn't spend much time with them (Moisés, professor).

These accounts, though well-intentioned, reveal a certain interpretive distance. By saying, "I don't know if it's something inherent to their own culture," Professor Ester suggests a vague and generalizing perception that may contribute to a distorted view of Romani culture. The lack of specific training on cultural diversity leads teachers to observe behaviors without understanding them in depth, which can reinforce stereotypes. Still on the subject of Romani students staying among their peers, one mother states:

> [...] My son has a cousin who won't go to school without him, so sometimes they'd tease them by separating them, because the girl cries without her cousin. So, when she cried, they would say all sorts of things. [...]. If they're separated, they won't go to class [...] He says he protects her, that the Roma kids stick together at recess so they can look out for one another. (Esmeralda Calon, mother of a Calon student).

Romani students' choice to stay together within the group cannot be understood as mere isolation. It is likely a protective strategy and a way to affirm their identity. In contexts where prejudice exists, being close to people from the same group provides mutual support and emotional security. Expecting Romani students to interact with their peers naturally implies a logic of cultural assimilation on the part of the school. To promote inclusion, it is important to recognize and value differences and create spaces where students can express their identities without abandoning them.

During interviews with mothers—and, in some cases, with fathers present—it was observed that topics related to prejudice and racism caused discomfort. They often remained silent or gave neutral responses. The interviewed mothers were clearly afraid to openly express their understanding of discrimination and prejudice because a culture of fear and silence had been adopted as a strategy to avoid possible reprisals or conflicts. However, as the interviews progressed, the participants demonstrated greater openness and willingness to share experiences related to these issues.

> [...] Some things went missing in the classroom once, so the professor asked to look through the boys' backpacks. I really didn't like that. We're not thieves. The boy said it wasn't in his backpack, and it wasn't. I taught my son to be honest. There were more than a few times when they asked to look through his backpack. I am the husband of Esmeralda Calon and the father of a Romani student.

> [...] When they go to school, they call her names. One day, they said her things were dirty. I was going to talk to them, but she asked me not to. She said, "Later, they'll laugh at us." They say we're troublemakers. But when we get there, they don't even look at us properly. They just think, "Oh, these are Gypsies." My daughter has a name. Her name isn't "little Romani." Do you think it's right to call boys "little Gypsies" and say that they don't learn, professor? (Jade Kalin, mother of a Romani student)

This discrimination sometimes manifests itself openly and explicitly. However, it sometimes occurs in subtle ways, often going unnoticed, even though it can have negative and lasting effects. According to Professor Estevão:

> [...] as soon as a Romani child is not included in school, exclusion automatically occurs. Because if we have a community of a different ethnic background within the school, and that school does not promote the inclusion of this culture—causing them to go unnoticed—then we can say that exclusion does indeed exist. And we see that there isn't much effort to promote this inclusion either, perhaps because they are unfamiliar with the culture (Estevão, professor).

Estevão's remarks highlight that the exclusion of Romani children from schools occurs not only because of prejudiced practices, but also because their cultural identity is ignored. Institutional neglect combined with a lack of training and ignorance contributes to the perpetuation of an exclusionary school environment. The professor's critique emphasizes the need for intercultural training for education professionals and initiatives that promote appreciation for

cultural diversity and the creation of inclusive school environments. As Silva Junior (2018) rightly points out, experiences of discrimination, such as insults or exclusion from school activities, not only undermine the dignity of Romani students, but also limit their access to a quality education.

Final Considerations

This study examined the relationship between Romani students and the school through interviews with mothers, professors, and educational coordinators. The interviews revealed multiple layers of challenges, tensions, and possibilities. Although families recognize the importance of school for their children's future, it does not yet function as a fully welcoming and inclusive environment in practice. Absenteeism, dropout rates, and the sense of exclusion experienced by many Romani students are exacerbated by the lack of intercultural training for school staff, a lack of knowledge about Romani culture, the perpetuation of stereotypes, and the absence of pedagogical strategies sensitive to diversity. Conversely, the interviews revealed that some teachers are open to dialogue and recognize the need to transform school practices. Families have also demonstrated interest in and appreciation for formal education, despite facing institutional and cultural barriers that hinder their active participation in daily school life.

Thus, including Romani children in the early years of elementary school requires more than just their physical presence. It requires recognizing their cultural identities, addressing discriminatory practices, and creating an environment that promotes belonging, active listening, and mutual respect. Only through an intercultural approach can schools fulfill their role as spaces for learning, citizenship, and social justice for all, including Romani children who have historically been rendered invisible in the Brazilian educational landscape. In conclusion, we are certain that schools can be spaces for dialogue and the celebration of cultural diversity. They can promote educational initiatives that strengthen the identities and potential of young people from different ethnic backgrounds.

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