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RECEIVED 18 May 2023

ACCEPTED 06 July 2023

PUBLISHED 24 August 2023

## CITATION

Herțanu M, Soponaru C and Păduraru AE (2023) Formal education vs. informal education in the Roma community—a silent confrontation where nobody wins. *Front. Educ.* 8:1225113. doi: 10.3389/educ.2023.1225113

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# Formal education vs. informal education in the Roma community—a silent confrontation where nobody wins

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**Objectives:** Our main aim was to identify the advantages and disadvantages that the Roma relate to formal education vs. informal education, a discrepancy in the balance between the two can enrich the explanations regarding their low level of schooling—which hinders their social inclusion.

**Method:** There were 28 participants of Roma ethnicity, aged between 19 and 52 years old, who took part in the study: 15 were married, 13 were single, all of them school graduates. The design of the study is a qualitative one and the data was collected by means of three focus groups, based on a semi-structured interview. The data was analysed by using the method of content analysis.

**Results:** In addition to the disadvantages related to institutional and economic factors, the Roma encounter in schools that belong to the cultural majority difficulties related to language and a lack of elements belonging to their culture. While they get used to the culture of the majority, they feel that they lose their own identity and that they are silently excluded from their community.

**Conclusion:** Formal education is seen as a way of personal development and as a path to an advantageous job, a door of access to the majority culture. However, informal education seems to win all the time, as a result of the family sovereignty and the fact that it is the central factor in the transmission and preservation of the Roma culture.

## KEYWORDS

Roma, formal education, informal education, social inclusion, discrimination, ethnic self-exclusion

## 1. Introduction

Individuals belonging to minority populations are often associated with the characteristics of vulnerable populations and they are subject to social exclusion and self-exclusion, which favors their captivity within a restricted social environment: family and community (Moldoveanu, 2015). The Roma come down into this category, as they are known for their geographical concentration and social isolation (Stark and Berlinschi, 2021), as they belong to the most marginalized ethnic group from Europe (Friberg, 2020).

The integration of the Roma in the context of equal treatment by increasing their social inclusion, as the largest ethnic minority in Europe, represents a policy priority, which is

considered at the EU level (Commission of the European Communities, 2008). Each EU country has prepared a national strategy for the integration of Roma and efforts are being made to fight against discrimination and hostility against them. EU countries are considering the development of medium term effective and inclusive cooperation mechanisms, involving the civil society and the national, regional and local authorities (Commission of the European Communities, 2008). A central intervention direction was and is formal education, for which non-governmental organizations, local authorities and churches comply. After these interventions, a series of reports were published, but they do not meet strict academic criteria (Zachos and Panagiotidou, 2019), which is a gap in the specialized literature.

Roma children generally have lower academic achievement than majority children in countries such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, North Macedonia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and UK (Rogers, 2021; Trbojević et al., 2023). In Romania, for example, the Roma community, in addition to low school success, has, unlike the majority, the highest school dropout rate, the highest level of illiteracy and the lowest level of higher education attainment (Patache et al., 2022), which contributes to the identification of Roma as a vulnerable group (Kiss et al., 2023). According to Rutigliano (2020), existing evidence indicates that a significant proportion of Roma children do not attend school at a level that corresponds to their chronological age. Therefore, increasing the educational achievement of Roma is a key priority in the field of combating their social exclusion (Merhaut et al., 2022). Also, across Europe, Roma tend to live below the poverty line, in precarious housing, without access to health care and adequate food, with high child mortality rates (Klaus and Siraj, 2020), children tending to be the most marginalized from an early age, facing stereotypes, discrimination and exclusion (Sakamoto et al., 2022).

This study investigates and compares for the first time the perceptions of formal and informal education of adult Roma members and how these might differ by gender and influence the decision to enroll them in school. In this way we focus directly on the main protagonists, covering an important criticism pointed out by Merhaut et al. (2022), namely the ignoring of Roma culture and the views of its people. This information is valuable as it could explain the low schooling of Roma, especially girls, and the failure of Roma schooling programs.

Formal education represents an educational model, it is organized, systematic, structured and administered in accordance with a set of rules and norms, considering the fulfillment of a set of objectives, based on a curriculum and methodology (Zaki, 1988). Informal education includes all the socio-human and cultural actions that occur spontaneously, often as daily activities and without an organized framework, which enable acquiring knowledge, skills and competences (Manolescu et al., 2018).

There are a number of causes that explain the low level of schooling of the Roma and the high dropout rate, among which are: poverty (because of which children do not have the necessary things to go to school and learn), discrimination and bullying in the school environment against the Roma, discrimination on the labor market, language barriers and the influence of the community on the importance considered by individuals to the formal education of children (Stark and Berlinschi, 2021; Stenroos and Helakorpi,

2021). However, despite its disadvantages, formal education is the most effective way for the social inclusion of the Roma (Rotaru, 2019).

We can see objectively that the interest in the education and in the training of the Roma has increased significantly and that concrete measures are taken in order to enable their access to education (Stenroos and Helakorpi, 2021). But these policies are applied rather to what the majority considers to be appropriate, and less to what the voices of this minority say (Zachos and Panagiotidou, 2019). There are few studies that have investigated the opinions, values and needs of the Roma (Bhopal and Myers, 2009), which points out the following: the Roma believe that formal education separates them from their culture, principles and ethical norms and favors their roles of bullied and bullies (Lloyd and McCluskey, 2008). Therefore, by means of this study, we decided to investigate qualitatively the perception of the Roma people toward the advantages and disadvantages of formal education, in order to better understand the refractory attitude identified by some studies conducted so far (Lloyd and McCluskey, 2008; Stark and Berlinschi, 2021), making a comparison with the way it is perceived the informal education received by children in the family and within the Roma community.

In this study, we aimed at identifying the opinions of some members of the Roma minority regarding formal and informal education, in order to be taken into account when designing programs for their social inclusion, so that they would respond to their true needs. More precisely, we wanted to answer the following questions: “What attitude do the Roma people have toward formal education?” “Is this attitude different according to the gender of the child?” “What are the advantages and disadvantages attributed by the Roma to formal and informal education?”

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Study design

The study is a qualitative one, based on the group interview. This approach enables deep explorations of the participants' perceptions about the researched issues and it encourages them to share their opinions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Charmaz, 2014). It is also a very time-efficient method for the data collection.

### 2.2. Participants

In this study there were included 28 persons who identified themselves as Roma. Among them, 15 are married, 13 are single, 9 participants are graduates of a form of higher education, 7 are students, 10 have graduated a form of secondary education, and 2 participants have graduated a form of lower education. The age of the participants was between 19 and 52 years old. All the participants currently live in the urban environment, although they are originally from rural Roma communities. Among the professions of the participants we can mention: a school mediator, a health mediator, an inspector in the local public administration, fiddlers and merchants. In the first focus group, 10 subjects participated, 10 in the second one, and 8 subjects in the third one.

### 2.3. Instrument

The data was collected by means of the semi-structured interview that aimed at investigating the following three main themes: the attitude of the origin family about the schooling of the subjects in the study, according to their gender (“What was the attitude of the family toward going to school? In the case of the girls? What about the boys?”), the advantages and disadvantages of formal education (“What are the advantages of formal education? What are the reasons why it is recommended that a Roma person should go to school? What are the disadvantages? What are the difficulties of a Roma person?”), the advantages and disadvantages of informal education (“What are the advantages of family and community education? What about the disadvantages?”). The semi-structured interview was the most useful research method to achieve our objective, aiming at capturing the subjective perceptions of the participants (Zachos and Panagiotidou, 2019).

### 2.4. Procedure

The people invited to take part in this study were identified among those who benefit from the activities of the Pro Roma association, whose main purpose is the support and also the social and professional inclusion of the Roma people in Romania. The focus groups were conducted in a space dedicated to group activities at Pro Roma association - based in the city of Iasi, in the north-east of Romania. The room was equipped with the necessary logistics to carry out the activity in optimal conditions. The subjects were made aware about the main purpose of this study, as well as the fact that they can withdraw at any stage of the research, without any repercussions on them and the quality of the services they benefit from in the association. The target groups were conducted by the first author of the study and were scheduled to last approximately 60 min, as subjects were not used to such activities and were easily impatient.

### 2.5. Ethics statement

All the participants were informed about the details of this study. The participation was voluntary, the participants had the opportunity to withdraw at any time and stage of the study without any consequences. The verbal consent was obtained from all the participants, for the participation in the study and also for the audio-video recording of the focus groups. In the article, the initials of the participants’ forenames and surnames were used in order to ensure their confidentiality. The study design met the ethical requirements of the authors’ faculty and of the Declaration of Helsinki.

### 2.6. Data analysis

The focus groups were audio and video recorded, and then transcribed and analyzed by the three authors of the study. The analysis of the content was made to identify the main themes, specifically the advantages and disadvantages of formal education and informal education (Strataki and Petrogiannis, 2021; Ferrández-Ferrer et al., 2022). The information was summarized in two tables.

## 3. Results

The participants to the research stated that they were predominantly encouraged by their parents and supported to go to school, although many of them came from families where both parents had no secondary or high school education. It was pointed out that the Roma are open to school, to learn, to acquire knowledge, not to be left behind. From the answers provided by the participants, it also results that the girls were also supported to go to school as much as the boys. However, the backing for this purpose came more from the parent who had less schooling. The parent with complete studies, i.e., high school education, had rather a refractory attitude: “For example, my mother graduated from high school here in I., my father graduated 8 classes, but of the two, my father helped me more in going to school than my mother. So all the time I had to become someone, I had to learn [...] But my father, who was a leather craftsman, had graduated only 8 classes, he wanted very much to guide me to graduate the high school and particularly the college” (G.N., 37 years old). At the basis of the attitude of the parent who pursued and graduated pre-university studies is particularly the discrimination experienced by himself, but also the one observed in his child: “Because she was disappointed by the system. Because I also had a lot of problems in high school, I was very discriminated by my teachers, even in college after, and maybe that’s why.” (G.N. 37 years old).

The summary of the most important advantages and disadvantages of formal education identified is presented in Table 1.

Some of the most often stated advantages of formal education are the acquisition of basic skills: writing, reading and arithmetic. Teachers are seen as a source of valuable information that cannot be acquired elsewhere, shaping an environment that favors the formulation of different perspectives and opinions on various aspects of life: “Teachers give us some things that we do not know” (G. G.,

TABLE 1 Advantages and disadvantages of formal education.

Formal education	
Advantages	Disadvantages
Learning to write, read, arithmetic	Failure to stimulate creativity and own opinions
Information	A lot of theory and too little practice
Critical thinking and wisdom,	The loss of specific community values and identity
growing up	The risk of a vicious environment
Developing different perspectives	Obstruction of learning traditional trades
Personal development	Financial investment for the resources needed in education
Organizational skills and adherence to a schedule	Long efforts, without the certainty of professional success
High professional and social status	Financial dependence on parents and living with parents for a longer period of time
Good, stable job	Postponing to start a family of their own
Independence	Reduced time allocated to family and social-recreational activities
Financial resources to support a family	Discrimination and bullying
Contact with another culture	Rejection by the members of the Roma community
Socialization	
Inclusion in the majority group	
Better image among the majority	
Appreciation from members of the Roma community	

19 years old), “As a person you can develop, you can debate different opinions with other people.” (M. G., 37 years old). Formal education enables critical thinking and develops maturity and wisdom: “It is first of all for us, it enables to cultivate ourselves, to be wise in life” (G.V., 52 years old), “[...] at college we see things differently” (M. G., 37 years old). It also lays the foundations for transversal skills, such as organization and time management: “School teaches you with a program, it educates you, it gives you some behavior, some performance, to say so, it gives you some directions” (M. S., 47 years old).

Attending a school, especially a college/faculty, enables the access to the labor market, to a stable, better-paid job that confers a highly social and professional status: “The social status after graduating from a faculty. After I finish and I have a stable job, the financial fulfillment will give me security” (R. M., 23 years old), “For a financial status, you find a job, a good job after that” (E. A., 23 years old), “[...] to become a great man” (C. 21 years old). Thus, the participants in this study see school as a way to achieve personal autonomy: “I think we all want to be independent. That’s what we work for, that’s why we learn” (D.O., 19 years old), especially financial, which was considered by some participants to be a goal for the foundation and upkeep of a family: “In order to start a family, I must have a pretty good financial situation, to be able to have a child and raise him/her the way I want” (R. M., 23 years old).

As well, school is perceived as a way to access to other cultures, mainly to the one of the majority: “It’s another opportunity, we see another world” (M. G., 37 years old), “The advantage was that I entered a new world; when I was at the college/faculty, I got into contact with people from other social categories, not only Roma” (G.N. 37 years old), which increased the chances of being accepted and appreciated by them: “From my point of view, the biggest advantage of the school as far as we are concerned as Roma people, is that we are better seen by the majority, all those of us who can say that we have graduated a form of higher education” (M.G., 37 years old).

Although the merit of the school is recognized by reference to the acquisition of essential skills, such as writing and reading, the members of the focus group considered that the school inhibits creativity and the free expression of opinions for the Roma children: “We learn mathematics, we learn to write, to read, we learn formulas, there is no room for creativity or very little” (M. V., 46 years old), “At school they do not allow children to have their own opinions. In the Roma families, children, as I think most of knows, still clamor sometimes, they are freer” (M. S., 49 years old). Also, the knowledge gained is predominantly theoretical, with the result: “We are not taught in school how to deal in life. That’s pretty much the essence” (V.D., 52 years old).

School can be a potentially vicious environment, this aspect is indicated especially by the participants aged up to 40 years old, who stated that school was not motivating enough and, out of boredom, in the presence of an inappropriate entourage, children can present unwanted behaviors: “Now my little girl is in the 1st grade and she leaves home with some education and principles, taught by me, and there she might see ...” (R. D., 33 years old). The Roma think that the girls going to school are more tempted to lose their virginity: “It depends on the values she was taught in the family, but she can lose her virginity due to the conjuncture and because she goes ...” (A. I., 47 years old). On the other hand, “If she stays at home, it is possible to get married very early and to be ... I do not know ... from our point of view, because I grew up among Romanians” (G.N., 38 years old).

Another problem expressed by the respondents was that a long schooling obstructs the process of learning traditional trades, or the preparation for life of the young man: “My father was a leather craftsman, he made leather purses and belts. He is gone now, we should carry on his job that he did for 45 years, but we do not know how, not because we did not want him to teach us, we did not have time, because we went to school. So we did not sit next to him to learn the trade” (G. N., 38 years old). In the Roma community, the job imposed respect and offered a certain status within the community: “I want to tell you that there are many Roma who did not go to school and who were very respected in their communities, they had good sense, they were leaders and they had this gift of earning their living with the jobs they had. I mean it was not necessary to have a formal education” (S. M., 49 years old).

In addition to the loss of the craft, the school needs financial resources: “one of them (disadvantages), so to speak, can be the material part. I mean, you have to invest some money for college/faculty, for ...” (I. T., 31 years old). This is a significant effort for some of the disadvantaged people from the Roma communities: “Maybe the child has nothing to wear, nothing to eat, he has to be present at school no matter what obstacles he has or problems, or family issues. There are many things that I encountered in the Roma communities, the fact that there is mud, water, and I cannot arrive” (A. I., 47 years old). These difficulties are also encountered in the secondary education cycles “And when I went to college, it seemed very difficult and I wanted to quit because I did not have a computer, I did not have what was necessary and I also had a child and I said to myself I will quit” (A. I., 47 years old).

In addition to this, the Roma who study spend too much time at the expense of their parents, but the school does not have any definite purpose, any guaranteed job: “There were even more factories before. You graduated and subsequently went to work. Nowadays there are no factories anymore. And most of those who have a university degree have positions tailored for graduates of secondary education. And then you think: Why should I study for so many years that anyway the salary will not give me the opportunity to accomplish myself, or to work in the field I studied” (V.G. 52 years old), “If previously you went to a Mechanical Engineering college, you became an engineer. Now you are graduating from the same college and you’ll find a job as a waiter in the worst coffee bar” (T. D., 47 years old).

Pursuing compulsory studies and continuing with university studies, from the point of view of the participants in this research, implies postponing the founding of a family: “Many times there are people who went to school and did not have time to start a family, so they focused only upon their career” (G. L., 37 years old). As time is suitable for learning, there is no room left for the family of origin and friends: “Time spent with the family” (A. S., 23 years old), “You spend too much time locked up to learn” (M. I., 33 years old).

All the participants stated that they were victims of discrimination at school, feeling that this would impact them all their lives: “The biggest disadvantage, from my point of view, is that most of the Roma were and are discriminated at school. They were treated badly, so to speak, by the children. Why? Because of the skin, because of ... I do not know ... maybe the poor did not have what they needed. This is a very big disadvantage, that’s why the Roma children do not go to school [...] A young man that I know personally said, after he came from school, I want to escape ... to take off this black skin. You’ve got what I mean” (I.T., 32 years old). Most of them stated that this discrimination marked them and they feel even today that unfortunate difference

expressed by either the other majority students or the teachers. They consider that this discrimination still exists today, in the new generation. Some of the Roma responded to discrimination by overcompensating: *“It motivated me more, I wanted to prove that it’s not really like that”* (I.T., 31 years old), while for others it prevented them from following their dreams: *“I simply lost a career because of discrimination”* (G. N., 38).

The risk of being excluded and marginalized by those from the Roma community was also pointed out: *“I see it as a disadvantage in the following way, very often in this musical field where I am still active, many of my colleagues told me: “Well, you are cool!” What was the meaning of their statement, as I no longer belong to the Roma ethnic group, I mean, this school makes you a philanderer, that is, it prevents you a little bit being ...”* (I. M. 32 years old, a Roma violinist). In addition, the contact with the Roma community is no longer so faithful, so frequent, the educated Roma change and often cannot find themselves anywhere: *“Then when you enter a group of Roma and you start to adopt ... let us say ... some sort of language or attitude, they already start to change their own perspective toward you [...] You do not know exactly if they mock you or not, you are no longer a member of their group and somehow they exclude you, they reject you psychologically”* (I. M., 32 years old), and they end up feeling that *“you lose your identity, so to say”* (I. M., 32 years old). This fear of losing one’s values and identity is transmitted from generation to generation: *“Their (parents) were a bit against (schooling) ... so to speak, my mother, at least, had the impression that if I move forward, I will somehow lose my values that they instilled in me”* (C. B., 23 years old).

As regarding the informal education, the one received in the family and in the Roma community, a significant result is that the participants did not report any disadvantage (Table 2).

Most of the study participants consider informal education received at home and within the community, *“superior”* (L.G. 37 years old), *“much healthier”* (C.B., 23 years old). There is a certain tendency to glorify and to defend the ethnic identity of the Roma: *“Because we, gypsies, think we are superior.”* (T. I., 31 years old), *“[...] I came to the conclusion, now after how many schools I attended and from where I went, that these old gypsies, with their traditions, were and still are smarter than all those who went to college”* (V.G., 52 years old). They believe that healthy life principles are passed down within the family, and that formal education, although it helps you get more information it only distracts you from finding happiness in simple things: *“You think: I need a car, I need a house, I need I do not know what else ... It was like that before, our grandparents did not think that they needed a car of some brand, a house of some sort. They were satisfied with little and they were very happy”* (M. S., 49 years old). In the traditional Roma

family, parents have the role of establishing the children’s path, both in terms of work and marriage, an aspect to which even the most circumspect people agree in the end: *“As far as I’m concerned, having children, and reaching these stages of life, I started to think and say: look, it was said that they are behindhand, but they do what they do well. He takes his son, marries him, gives him a house, establishes a family, and then he has a goal”* (V. D., 52 years old).

Also, informal education received in the family leads, rather than the formal one, to acquiring life skills, which helps young people implement practical things for survival and useful to identifying solutions: *“I believe that in Roma families, our parents taught us to fish, they did not give us the fish. They gave us the fishing rod, they gave us the tools and they never put money on the table and said: go get your cars, have fun. They taught us how to make money”* (M. G., 38).

Creativity and free expression of opinions, respect for others, especially for the elderly people within the family and unity are encouraged in the family of origin.

## 4. Discussion

This study investigated, through a qualitative research method, the Roma’s perception of formal and informal education, with the purpose of identifying a possible explanation for their low level of schooling, a factor that can make their social inclusion more difficult. Specifically, we aimed to observe the attitude of the Roma in general about formal education, and also to identify the advantages and disadvantages of this method of education from their point of view. This approach has also been carried out in the past (Lambrev, 2015; Strataki and Petrogiannis, 2021; Ferrández-Ferrer et al., 2022), but the new element that we brought was that we compared these results with the informal education received in the family and in the community. We considered that it is not enough to study only whether the Roma identify benefits in going to school, but also whether these benefits are as great as those considered by them to derive from informal education.

The acquisition of basic skills such as writing, reading, and arithmetic, along with planning and the ability to follow a schedule, are among the core benefits of formal education that all the participants unequivocally agreed upon and that are often stipulated in the specialty literature (Manolescu et al., 2018).

In school, people have the opportunity to interact with diverse groups, to make different opinions, to develop personally, to make life plans and to acquire the necessary tools to fulfill those (González-Patiño and Esteban-Guitart, 2014). This idea is also identified in this study, whereas formal education is considered an opportunity for intellectual, professional and social development.

Formal education is seen by the participants in this study as a way to get a better social and professional status (Rotaru, 2019; Strataki and Petrogiannis, 2021), but at the same time as a threat to the transmission of traditional artistry from generation to generation. According to some participants, formal education does not guarantee you a job, especially after all the resources invested, but traditional jobs are a much more reliable source of maintenance. Although this is the perception of the participants, studies show us that many people of Roma ethnicity make their incomes, in different EU countries, from begging or other street activities, among others, as a result of the reduction of opportunities to exercise traditional activities (Friberg, 2020). If they do not

TABLE 2 Advantages of informal education.

Informal education
Advantages
It respects the values of the Roma community
It enables the transmission of traditional trades
It builds practical life skills
It encourages independence, autonomy and creativity
The parents establish the destiny of children

complete their studies, their access to the labor market is limited, which also does not allow them to benefit from social rights (Tervonen and Enache, 2017).

The role of formal education is not only to help an individual understand and use academic theories and concepts, but also to help him/her internalize ethical and moral principles, to become a good citizen and inhabitant of this planet (Kapur, 2019). Attending school appears to be equally encouraged for both boys and girls, similar to the study by Ferrández-Ferrer et al. (2022). The problem is that universally accepted values are fundamentally promoted by formal education, but ethnic particularities are lost sight of, which is perceived as a threat by minorities and favors non-schooling. The difficulties of the school to understand and adapt to the social, economic, psychological and cultural specifics of the community prevent the fulfilling of its mission to shape competent people (González-Patiño and Esteban-Guitart, 2014).

Among the most important disadvantages of formal education identified by the Roma in this study it was precisely the loss of cultural identity and community customs. This fear is based on the fact that the Roma do not find information about their culture and lifestyle in schools (Stenroos and Helakorpi, 2021), whereas the objective of the school nowadays seems to be rather an assimilation one (Lesar et al., 2006). The non-appreciation of the minority culture in the school represents a barrier for parents and children in giving a meaning for pursuing and completing a form of education (Lambrev, 2015). The introduction of cultural elements in schools can have significant beneficial effects on the development and school training of the Roma. For example, in Romania, the measures taken to train teachers to work with the Roma children, the introduction of the Roma staff in schools, the allocation of special places for the Roma, the preservation of the Roma language, history and culture and the prohibition of segregation have led to the proud assumption of ethnic identity, which improved school results and participation in classes among the Roma students (Sarău, 2013). Similar results have been achieved in Serbia and the UK by introducing Roma assistants in schools (Klaus and Siraj, 2020). These aspects are important for the Roma, because after the threat of losing their cultural identity, they feel that they also lose their values and family, and ultimately themselves. The loss of cultural identity, associated with a confused sense of self, comes with low self-confidence, with a domino effect upon the behavior, which may explain low academic achievement and school dropout (Syed et al., 2013).

There are a number of disadvantages of formal education that we can consider to be generally valid, as they are highlighted regardless of ethnicity (Wagner et al., 2022). Some of these disadvantages are the high costs, the unequal ratio between theory and practice, the non-stimulation of creative thinking, also identified in a group of young people of Roma ethnicity, from the same country as the group of this study (Manolescu et al., 2018). Factors such as legal and administrative procedures, costs and language have often been identified in the specific literature as barriers for the Roma to access to education (Van den Bogaert, 2018).

A high level of dissatisfaction was also identified with the lack of learning and development of important cultural life skills for Roma, because the curricula do not meet their values (Christianakis, 2010). Our results highlight how the lack of elements belonging to Roma culture in the school curriculum, as highlighted by other recent studies in several European countries

(Spielhaus et al., 2020; Trbojević et al., 2023), is a real impediment to school attendance.

Another criticism at the school environment is that the Roma children are often targets of discrimination and bullying (Christianakis, 2010; Rogers, 2021). Thus, parents often choose to keep their children away from such risks and to teach themselves values and skills that will help them cope in life (Czaderny, 2022), even if that will force their children to live only within their communities. In schools, the Roma are the most vulnerable group, experiencing discrimination and racism (EU Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, 2006). The Roma children are often, in several European countries, victims of indirect discrimination, which takes the form of segregated education, ending up learning in special schools or separate classes (O'Nions, 2010; Cviklova, 2015). When segregation occurs, the quality of the educational act is less qualitative, the school having weaker facilities, financial and human resources, compared to ethnically mixed schools (Merhaut et al., 2022). In Slovakia, for example, the percent of Roma studying in segregated schools or classrooms exceeds 60% (Jurco, 2023). This is the reason why mixed schools are preferred for their children, including by Roma parents (Surdu, 2004).

The association of school with a vicious environment, where girls lose their virginity more easily, may stem from different perspectives on what it means to start a sexual life and get married in the mainstream culture. In the Roma culture girls must marry virgins and very young, and obey to a patriarchal model where they will have the role of wife, mother and housewife (Ferrández-Ferrer et al., 2022). At school, the Roma girls learn that there is another perspective, but if they choose to follow it, they cause a disaster not only in their family, but also in the whole community (UNICEF Serbia, 2019).

Formal education incurs the costs of entering into the community of the majority and those of getting out of the Roma lifestyle. Thus, it is not only about the fact that the Roma will face the resistance of the majority, but also the disapproval of those in the Roma community, because they take over the elements of the majority culture, which are often perceived as a source of impurity (Ciaian and Kancs, 2019; Czaderny, 2022). The school is practically the territory where discrimination from the majority and the self-isolation of the Roma meet and mutually reinforce each other, against the background of an education system that is criticized for the same things by both sides, but also of the severe mistrust of the Roma in formal education (Friberg, 2020).

On the other hand, informal education enables the acquisition of adaptation skills to everyday life, but which are based on the empirical knowledge that cannot be recognized by certifications (Manolescu et al., 2018), so necessary for the access to skilled jobs.

Family, loyalty and fraternity are very important for the Roma (Hepnarova, 2014), which is why informal education may be considered clearly superior, regardless of the advantages of formal education. A different attitude may be taken into consideration and felt as an act of treason, which is why the participants in this study did not identify even one disadvantage of informal education. The family is the one who decides what is acceptable and what is not in the conduct of a Roma person, it is the Supreme Court, and the minimum deviation from what it considers acceptable means self-exclusion (Enache, 2014). Cherishing informal education keeps the Roma within the safe boundaries of the community, away from the

discrimination of the majority, which is still found at high levels, even in developed countries, despite the implementation of non-discriminatory policies (Falck, 2021).

## 5. Limits and future research directions

It is unclear to us whether and how the ethnicity of the interviewer was perceived by the participants and whether it influenced the results. Participants may have identified the interviewer's ethnicity, which may have encouraged them to identify only advantages of informal education and to support its superiority.

The number of participants is limited, and the cross-sectional nature of the study limits the validity of those identified only for the moment of data collection. It could be useful to conduct some longitudinal studies, with the purpose of measuring the experience of the Roma children during different education cycles, but also the manifestation degree of the disadvantages identified in this study, in order to be able to implement appropriate improvement strategies. The results of our study cannot be generalized, not only because of the small number of participants, but especially because Roma are not a homogeneous group in Europe or in Romania (Achim, 1998; Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2022; Macías León and Del Pino-Brunet, 2023). In Romania, about 16 Roma groups can be identified, but their ethnic identity is defined by a common law, the Rromanipen, the Rromani law, a system of community norms and concepts, which revolves around the identity model of traditional culture, emphasizing values such as family, brotherhood, purity (Grigore et al., 2007). In this way, our results cannot be absolutely attributed to the thinking of all Roma, but they highlight their general tendency to relate to education. As a result, their perspectives on both types of education, especially on informal education, are predominantly the expression of culture.

All the participants were schooled, which means they all experienced the disadvantages of formal education personally, which may point out the idealization and romanticizing of informal education. Conducting studies on larger groups of participants could provide more information regarding this trend identified in the present study. Also, future studies could consider investigating responses to the present study's questions in younger populations of participants who are attending some form of education.

## 6. Conclusion

The Roma are the largest ethnic group in Europe, the most exposed to discrimination and social isolation. One intervention that supports the social inclusion of the Roma is formal education. However, despite the efforts made by non-governmental organizations, local authorities and churches, the schooling level of the Roma is very low. The issue with the implemented policies so far is that they were mostly built according to what the majority considered appropriate, ignoring the values and opinions of the Roma people. The participants in this study have a high level of mistrust in formal education, despite the recognition of undeniable advantages. One of the biggest threats is the loss of cultural identity,

which attracts the exclusion from the community. In other words, while they get used to the culture of the majority, they feel that they lose their own identity and that they are silently excluded from their community. This study indicates for the first time the supremacy of informal education, to which not a single disadvantage was identified by the participants. Thus, international Roma social inclusion programs should integrate their loyalty to culture and family.

In order to encourage the pursuit of formal education, additional support can be provided by training sessions and the inclusion of intercultural mediators in schools, appropriate teaching material (including craft workshops, for example) and specially trained teachers to educate children of different ethnicities. As a result of the fact that in the Roma culture the family has the most important role in determining the path of a child, the school should focus on creating a bond with the families of the Roma children and should integrate elements of their culture into the children's formal education. Last but not least, intervention programs to reduce bullying against all children, and especially against children of Roma ethnicity, should be prioritized and applied in schools.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iasi. Informed verbal consent for participation in the study was obtained from the participants and documented in the audio/video recordings.

## Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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