

The hope of a better life? Exploring the challenges faced by migrant Roma families in Ireland in relation to children's education

Kennedy and Smith (2018) Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies

Methodology

Involved 'insider-research' with 18 Roma peer researchers.

- Quantitative data via questionnaire-based survey of Roma adults - written in English and verbally translated into Romanii. Data collected from 609 people, 12-15% or more of the total Roma population in Ireland (estimated 4-5k)
- Semi-structured interviews in 8 focus-groups with Roma participants, stakeholders and relevant professionals, including welfare officers, home-school liaison officers and family support workers. In total 120 participants
- Limitations: only focused on adult perceptions of the problems - no children's voices.



Key finding

Roma adults relied on children to translate for them - linked to children's absenteeism from school: service providers expressed concerns about poor attendance at school and early school leaving amongst Roma children.

Parents being 'criminalised' for children's non attendance yet no other option open to them.

Catch 22

Education, Language and Literacy: Issues for Parents

- Roma parents reported that their lack of English and poor literacy skills led to discrimination and exclusion
- No knowledge of how to negotiate the education system
- Difficulties accessing information

(Mis)recognition of Roma Culture

- Service providers tended to see Roma integration as uni-directional rather than acknowledging and adapting any processes to reflect the Roma culture.
 - Absence of Roma culture and history from the curriculum



Material deprivation:

Research reported the extent and depth of poverty experienced by Roma in Ireland.

- Adults - difficulty getting jobs
- Overcrowded households with no space to study
- Food poverty a serious issue for Roma families
- Severe hunger - lethargy in children which can be misinterpreted as disengagement
- School books and uniform - unaffordable burden for Roma households
- Inability to pay any 'voluntary' contributions towards children's education



Conclusions

- Education system not a means of social mobility for marginalised groups like Roma in Ireland.
- Translating for parents exposes children to a high-level of responsibility for the difficulties families may be experiencing.
- Factors relating to poverty also expose children to physical and cognitive impairment and health problems
- Children reported as happy and settled but parents reported instances of bullying and name-calling at school

Implications for schools

Provide interpreters to create two-way conversations with parents that don't have to go via the children.

Provide a nutritious daily meal to counteract food poverty

Support Roma families with textbooks and other learning materials

Include more recognition of Roma history and culture in the curriculum

Educate staff to avoid assumptions being made about families' abilities to support their children because Roma parents value education for their children as a pathway to something better

