

The school promoter in Catalonia: a pilot experience between family and school

Il promotore scolastico in Catalonia: un'esperienza pilota tra famiglia e scuola

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, faced with the arrival in their classrooms of children from foreign countries and ethnic minorities, schools, especially public schools, have had to face new challenges related to cultural and religious diversity. In response to these new emerging issues, and to promote social justice, educational success, equity and equal opportunities, schools have implemented actions and projects in collaboration with other socio-educational agents in the environs. On the other hand, many authors point out the benefits of establishing good relationships and communication between the school and families, for the benefit of the school and teaching staff, the students and the families themselves. However, they also point out the existence of linguistic, cultural, socio-economic and institutional barriers that hinder this. Focusing on Roma pupils and their families, one of the actions implemented in Catalonia in attempts to overcome these barriers and promote the educational success of the pupils, as well as favouring a good relationship with the families, is the figure of the Roma school promoter (intercultural mediator). This article focuses on the analysis of this figure, their functions and the actions they carry out. To this end, it analyses the results of four ethnographies carried out in centres of maximum complexity in Catalonia and the results of documentary analysis and in-depth interviews with professionals and experts on the subject.

Keywords: intercultural mediator, primary schools, Romany families, school-family relationship, communication barriers.

Sommario

A partire dagli anni '90, le scuole, soprattutto quelle pubbliche, di fronte all'arrivo nelle loro classi di bambini provenienti da Paesi stranieri e di minoranze etniche, hanno dovuto affrontare nuove sfide legate alla diversità culturale e religiosa. In risposta a queste nuove sfide emergenti e al fine di promuovere la giustizia sociale, il successo educativo, l'equità e le pari opportunità, le scuole hanno implementato azioni e progetti in collaborazione con altri agenti socio-educativi dell'ambiente. D'altra parte, molti autori sottolineano i vantaggi di stabilire una buona relazione e comunicazione tra la scuola e le famiglie, a beneficio della scuola e del personale docente, degli studenti e delle famiglie stesse. Tuttavia, essi sottolineano anche l'esistenza di barriere linguistiche, culturali, socio-economiche e istituzionali che rendono difficile questo processo. Per quanto riguarda gli alunni rom e le loro famiglie, una delle azioni attuate in Catalogna per combattere queste barriere e promuovere il successo scolastico degli alunni, oltre a favorire un buon rapporto con le famiglie, è la figura del promotore scolastico rom. Questo articolo si concentra sull'analisi di questa figura, delle sue funzioni e delle azioni svolte. A tal fine, analizza i risultati di quattro etnografie condotte in scuole ad alta complessità in Catalogna e i risultati di analisi documentali e interviste in profondità con professionisti ed esperti del settore.

Parole chiave: mediatore interculturale, scuole elementari, famiglie rom, rapporto scuola-famiglia, barriere comunicative.

Introduction

This article is part of two projects headed by the research group Análisis Social y Educativa (GR.ASE), within the call of the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness. The first is entitled: *Cultural diversity at school: discourses, policies and practices* (CSO2017-84872-R) and the second *Family participation in primary schools. Families of foreign origin: diagnosis and design of proposals for improvement* (PID2021-124334NB-100). The lead researchers on both projects are Jordi Garreta and Núria Llevot.

Since the 1990s, cultural diversity in Spanish classrooms, especially in public schools, has grown significantly due to the arrival of foreign students and ethnic minorities. This phenomenon and the European Union's discourses on taking cultural differences into account have given impetus to the intercultural discourse (Torrelles, 2022), which has been integrated into such other broader labels as social cohesion and inclusion (Garreta and Torrelles, 2020). In response to new educational and social challenges, schools have implemented projects and actions in synergy with socio-educational agents to promote equal opportunities, equity, inclusion, educational success and a good intercultural climate (Llevot and Bernad, 2019). One of the objectives of the 2030 Agenda is quality education for all students and one of the indicators for this is school-family collaboration. Research carried out in Spain indicates that among the factors that intervene in the performance and educational success – social, personal, emotional and academic – of students, the involvement of families in the school institution and in their children's educational project is very important (Vigo *et al.*, 2023). Recent studies (Andrés-Cabello, 2023) point out that the involvement of families in the school, a fluid relationship and two-way communication are key factors in achieving the educational success of students. However, several studies (Bernad, 2016; Carmona *et al.*, 2019; Llevot and Garreta, 2024) reveal problems in the relationship and communication barriers between families of foreign origin and ethnic minorities and school professionals. On the part of the families, it was a lack of knowledge of the language, cultural distances, value of education, for example. And for the professionals, institutionalisation, cultural stereotypes, micro-racisms, lack of knowledge of the needs of families, among other barriers, that could favour the creation of negative spirals.

Thus, these barriers to communication and participation can be linguistic, cultural, socio-economic and institutional (Garreta and Llevot, 2022). However, it is also true that there is a conviction that it is necessary to promote dialogue and implement actions in synergy with the socio-educational agents of the surroundings (Vecina *et al.*, 2024). Thus, although a mismatch is indicated between the discourse towards cultural diversity and practices in schools (Garreta *et al.*, 2020), actions and practices have been implemented with uneven success to favour communication and family-school relationships and the involvement of ethnic minority families (Llevot and Bernad, 2016, 2020). This article focuses on the families of Roma pupils attending public and private primary schools in Catalonia and analyses the practices carried out by the schools to overcome the barriers detected and to promote a better school-family relationship and the participation of families, with the aim of furthering the educational success of Roma pupils.

In Catalonia, the project to promote the Romany population in schools has been active since 2005. This is a specific project to attend to these pupils and is part of a broader and more global framework, the Integral Plan for the Romany population (Departament de Treball, Afers Socials i Famílies, 2018), promoted by the government of the Generalitat de Catalunya. Within the framework of the School Promotion Project, the external figure of the school promoter has been implemented. This article specifically analyses the role

of this figure as an intercultural mediator and a link and facilitator of communication between the school and Romany families. In other words, we start from the hypothesis that school promoters can play an effective role as channels of communication between Roma families and schools. To this end, we analyse the documentation relating to the figure of the school promoter and the interviews carried out in the first phase of the second study. Then, we briefly analyse the experiences that are being carried out in the schools covered by the first ethnographic study to improve communication and the involvement of Roma families, as well as the barriers detected.

2. Method

The results of the two projects mentioned above are used as a starting point. Regarding ethical considerations, both studies comply with all ethical standards set out in the *Declaration of Helsinki* (World Medical Association, 2013). Participants were informed about the nature and aims of the study and the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses were assured. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were notified that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. In addition, personal data were protected according to the provisions of Organic Law 3/2018 of 5 December on Personal Data Protection and guarantee of digital rights (Ley Orgánica 3/2018, de 5 de diciembre, de Protección de Datos Personales y garantía de los derechos digitales). To ensure the anonymity of the participants, an acronym has been assigned to each interview. The following tables (Tab. 1 and Tab. 2) show the construction of the acronyms:

School	Position of person interviewed	Age	Genre	Year of the interview	Acronym
Blue: B	Teacher: T	40	Woman: W	2021	BTW40
Red: R	Head of Studies: HS	52	Man: M	2021	RHSM52
Yellow: Y	Teacher: T	35	Woman: W	2021	YTW35
Yellow: Y	School promoter: SP	32	Woman: W	2021	YSPW32
Green: G	Headmistress: HA	50	Woman: W	2021	GHAW50
Green: G	Social Integration Technician: SI	45	Woman: W	2021	GSIW45
Green: G	Teacher: T	38	Man: M	2021	GTM38

Tab. 1: Interview acronyms, first study (own elaboration).

Institution	Position of person interviewed	Age	Genre	Year of the interview	Acronym
Orange School: O	Social Educator: SE	46	Woman: W	2024	OSE46W2024
Department of Education	School Promoter: SP	40	Woman: W	2024	DESP40W2024
Department of Education: DE	Inspector: I	55	Woman: W	2023	DEI55W2024
Department of Education: DE	Technician	37	Woman: W	2023	DET37W2024

Tab. 2: Interview acronyms, second study (own elaboration).

First study: Cultural diversity at school: discourses, policies and practices

The first phase consisted of an analysis of the evolution of educational policies regarding cultural diversity in Spain. The second phase consisted of a survey of 1,740 heads of schools. In the third phase, a 6-month ethnographic study was carried out in 18 schools. The fourth phase consisted of the dissemination of the work.

For the purpose of this article, we focus on the third phase, completed in June 2021, taking into account that it was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the consequent intermittent confinement of class groups and restricted access to schools for families and external agents. We analysed the practices and dynamics of four primary schools in Catalonia, which, for the sake of anonymity, we call with colours (Blue, Red, Yellow and Green), with respect to Roma pupils and their families. These institutions were selected taking into account that we had to choose schools with more than 30% of pupils of foreign and Romany origin, that were public and subsidised (publicly funded) and including urban and rural schools – schools in municipalities with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants.

Typology of the four schools

The first one is *Blue*, a state-subsidised school, located in Barcelona and of Adventist denomination. Although there are also pupils of gypsy ethnicity, approximately 80% of the enrolment corresponds to pupils of foreign origin from various countries. This school has a long history of welcoming students of foreign origin, working in favour of inclusion and coexistence, and a good atmosphere among the members of the educational community is significant. There are no cases of school dropout or persistent absenteeism.

The second is the public school we called *Red*, located in a village near Lleida. It is in a rural environment and has 29% Roma pupils and 24.87% pupils of foreign origin. Although this school implements good practices in favour of inclusion and coexistence, teachers and other professionals report more problems of absenteeism, school drop-out, difficulties in relations with families.

The third is the school named *Yellow*, also public. Seventy-five percent of the pupils are Roma and 20% are of foreign origin. Moreover, this school has a long history in the neighbourhood and an important track record in terms of good practices in favour of inclusion, coexistence and interculturality, and there is also a good atmosphere among the members of the educational community. It had a pilot experience in Roma mediation that began in the 1992/93 school year (Llevot, 2016).

The fourth school is the public school we called *Green*. Although it also has Roma pupils, 72% of the pupils are of foreign origin. In addition, despite being relatively new, this school also has a good track record in terms of good practices in favour of inclusion, coexistence and interculturality, and the good atmosphere that exists among the members of the educational community is significant.

Second study: Family participation in primary schools. Families of foreign origin: diagnosis and design of proposals for improvement (PID2021-124334NB-I00)

This second project involves working groups from 4 Spanish universities. It started in 2022 and is expected to be completed in 2025. The work is divided into four phases. The first phase was devoted to the compilation and analysis of documentation on the policies, programmes and projects of educational administrations relating to the involvement of families in general and families from minority backgrounds in particular. The information was complemented with in-depth interviews with people of different profiles, experts in the issues addressed. In the second phase, a survey was carried out among a wide sample of members of school management teams in the Autonomous Communities of the Balearic Islands, Catalonia, La Rioja and Cantabria. In the third phase, an ethnographic study will be carried out in schools in the aforementioned autonomous communities. The fourth phase will focus on dissemination.

For this article, we start from the results of the first phase in Catalonia, that is, from the documentary analysis and interviews regarding the figure of the intercultural mediator, specifically that of the Roma school promoter, implemented in Catalonia.

3. Results

Results from the first study: Family-school relationship. Communication channels and relationship barriers

In the school called *Blue*, as mentioned above, there are no cases of school drop-out or persistent absenteeism. Some families are Adventist, others are Evangelical and there are also families of other religious denominations. There is a certain percentage of Roma pupils but there are no reports of cultural conflicts among pupils and families. However, some teachers indicate differences in values between the school and the Romany families, as well as the little importance given to the school in some cases, which sometimes interfere in their educational work and the involvement of the families in the education of their children. In the case of some Roma families, the barriers to communication are socio-economic – linked in many cases to the digital divide and the lack of financial resources – and cultural – unequal value given to school and education and differences in the role of women and the family.

The usual channel of communication when the ethnographic study was carried out was videoconferencing using the Zoom programme through the school's educational platform, either in the case of individual interviews with families – the so-called tutorials – or collective meetings with families. Of course, the platform also has a messaging and email service, which can be used by both teachers and families, especially to provide information on specific issues. Another channel used is the WhatsApp group, with a mixed rating. However, the most highly valued channel is the personal one: «With Roma mothers, you have to know how to get along with them, but by talking, taking an interest... little by little you gain their trust and it is easier» (BT40W2021).

At the *Red* centre, they explained that as it is a highly complex centre, they have a Social Integration Technician assigned to the centre. In addition to working to prevent absenteeism, especially with Roma pupils – notorious in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic –, this person plays an important role in communication with Roma families, taking advantage of the times when they come and go and informal times outside the centre to establish contact with them. Another channel is the pupils themselves, who explain the notes in the diary or a circular or a request from their teacher to their parents. In addition to socio-economic barriers, others were detected. These include differences in the value given to the school or the lack of confidence in the educational institution and the teaching staff. General actions are carried out, such as «training talks on various topics related to upbringing and education (food, discipline, ICTs, etc.), participation in festive activities at the centre...» (RHS52M2021).

In the *Yellow* school, a certain absenteeism among Romany pupils was detected as was little participation of Romany families in the school's activities, especially in the formal bodies, like School Council and association of families (AFA) and in which a more active collaboration is required. The staff interviewed, both teachers and non-teaching professionals, also indicate a notable lack of interest in the education of their children on the part of Roma families. Also, in general, although these families state that they want a good education for their children, they lack the personal and cultural resources to become actively involved and perceive the values of the school as contrary to their own culture. Thus, a middle school teacher comments that:

they tell you that yes, that the child will have her homework done, that she will be punished by not watching TV for a week and then the next day the homework is not done and the child tells you that she has been up until twelve o'clock watching a TV programme with the whole family, and so there is little we can do (YT35W2021).

The most common channels of communication with these families are personal contact and telephone, and the teachers interviewed highlight the work carried out by the social educator. However, in this school, a professional external to the centre plays an important role: the *gypsy/school promoter*. This role is in both communication and school-family relations and the daily activity of the centre, controlling absenteeism, calling families or accompanying them to carry out administrative procedures. They fulfil functions within the centre and the community environment with Roma pupils and their families, with the aim of promoting educational success.

Then there are more functions because we enter the school and you start to pass out the lists, to make calls, to talk to the families... warning them a little bit that they are safe in the classroom now, that there are many security measures... And that's our day-to-day work (YSP32W2021).

In the school called *Green*, a good climate of coexistence among the educational community is indicated. Although they work hard to break down stereotypes and *urban legends*, carrying out many general and specific actions to work on cultural diversity, they encounter some stumbling blocks. «They love the school, the project and everything, and then they ask the neighbours what this school is like and they say that all the immigrants from the neighbourhood go here, and also gypsies, and they don't want to come anymore» (GHA50W2021). As a centre classified as of maximum complexity by the Catalan educational administration, they have non-teaching professionals assigned to them, specifically a social educator and a social integrator, whose functions include communication with families to bring them closer to the centre and encourage their participation. Socio-economic and cultural barriers to communication and participation are particularly highlighted. Thus, for example, certain differences are pointed out between native families and families of foreign origin and ethnic minorities when it comes to choosing a centre for the schooling of their children.

They don't choose the school because of the educational project, they choose it because of proximity and word of mouth, «there you don't have to pay for books or fees; there is a social worker there and they look at the scholarship»... and Roma families the same, they don't look at the educational project or the methodology, that doesn't go with their culture... also the fact that it is a centre of maximum complexity, means that they deploy resources so that you can attend to this diversity (GHI45W2021).

For communication with Roma families, social services are used, especially in the case of pupils at risk of absenteeism, in addition to the staff from the social sphere incorporated into the centre's staff. Traditional channels, such as personal interviews and telephone, are also used, the latter being more useful than e-mail. The school diary is mentioned as a channel that is not very effective. Difficulties are also reported in conducting interviews between tutors and families.

It costs a lot, you make a date, send a reminder, write it in the diary and tell the child: «remind your mother that I'll call her tomorrow and we'll talk, we'll make a video call», and then nothing, the mother doesn't even bother to apologize, she simply doesn't answer the phone (GT38M2021).

In times of pandemics, they have had to adapt communication channels, with the mobile phone emerging as the most effective channel for contacting and talking to families to monitor their children's school progress.

Before, we used tutorials, interviews... we also communicated with the diary, by phone... we sent an email... at the door of the school, it was a good moment, we took advantage of the moments of entry and exit to talk to the mothers... Now it is a call or video call (GHA50W2021).

Results from the second study: The school promoter, a channel for dialogue between schools and families

In the first phase of this recently started second project, (2022-2025), as mentioned above, we analyse documentation from Autonomous Communities and also conduct interviews with people knowledgeable in this area. Hence, based on the results of this first year, we will be able to focus more on the figure of school promoters. Thus, focusing on Catalonia, in addition to analysing the respective documentation, we have conducted interviews with 2 technicians from the Department of Education of the Generalitat de Catalunya, 1 technician from Barcelona City Council and 1 technician from the Social Services of the Generalitat de Catalunya, all of whom are knowledgeable about the central themes of the project. We have also interviewed 3 representatives of the School Council of Catalonia, of the Federated Associations of Families of Pupils in Catalonia (AFFAC), of the Federation of Parents' Associations of Students of Educational Centers (FAPACE), who are familiar with the situation of families from minority backgrounds. Moreover, for this article, these interviews with technicians and high-level representatives are complemented by interviews with an inspector and a school promoter of Department Education, and also with the social educator and the management team of a school with a high presence of Roma pupils. This school is part of the sample of schools where ethnographic research will be conducted in the third phase of the project. To keep the anonymity of this school, we will call it Orange.

Thus, based on the documentary analysis and results of the interviews, we will explain what the school promoter project consists of from its beginnings, its objectives, how it is currently being carried out, as well as its strengths and weaknesses. The origin of the project dates back to 2005. The reports of the Department of Education of the Generalitat de Catalunya highlighted the high percentage of absenteeism and school failure among Roma students and the need to have a positive impact and create a continuous action of an extraordinary nature. With this aim the School Promotion Programme was born. The Pere Closa Private Foundation was chosen to partner the Department of Education to develop and implement this project, which is part of a broader and more global framework, the Integral Plan for the Romany population, promoted by the Generalitat de Catalunya. In addition, town councils from municipalities where the plan is being developed also collaborate. From its beginnings to the present day, the School Promotion Plan has been extended throughout the four provinces of Catalonia, with a staff of 30 school promoters for the 2022-2023 school year.

Currently, based on the analysis of the Department of Education's documentation (2024) on the aforementioned project, the following objectives are envisaged: to achieve the full schooling of Roma pupils in Catalonia in the different stages of the education system, through prevention, diagnosis and early action against truancy; to contribute to school success and the socio-occupational promotion of Roma pupils; and, finally, to promote the visibility and values of Roma culture within the curriculum and life of the school. To this end, school promoters are hired as professionals external to the educational centres. These promoters, who usually belong to the Romany population, have initial and continuous training and act as *semi-professional* intercultural mediators.

Giving the floor to the school promoter interviewed, she explains their functions:

The main functions of the promoter are.... well... absenteeism, being with the families, accompanying the families, because if a mother needs you to accompany her to make... a change of school... eh... that is our function in principle, is that the children get to have a better future, because it has always been said «Gypsies drop out»... (DESP40W2024).

Within the school promotion project, the Department of Education (2024) establishes 4 areas of intervention: the management and teaching teams, the pupils, the families and the environment. And within each area, lines of intervention are established for the professional who carries out the functions of school promoter. Taking into account these general lines of intervention, and as we have been told by the Education Inspectorate, «each centre establishes a working proposal and evaluation indicators with the name of the centre, timetable, work space, referent and socio-educational commission» (DEI55W2024). With an established guideline for assessing the actions, including those responsible for them – social promoter, management team, staff from the Language, Interculturality and Social Cohesion counselling team – and the timing – throughout the school year, whether it is monthly, weekly or on demand.

In practice, based on the interviews carried out, actions in cooperation with the educational centre and surrounding entities have emerged. These include helping to reduce absenteeism by making telephone calls, tutorials with families and home visits; specific reinforcement in the classroom with accompaniment of the tutors in classroom management, encouraging the participation of the pupils in the activities proposed; helping to implement projects to improve schooling and increase the expectations of Romany pupils; encouraging the participation of Romany families in monitoring the education of their children and in the cultural events organised in the school; talks and specific activities with Romany families to promote the value of schooling and increase educational expectations; accompanying families in processing grants and scholarships; monitoring the schooling of pupils, from their incorporation into the educational system (infant education I3), with special emphasis on the transition from primary to secondary and accompanying the pupils most vulnerable to dropping out; participating in actions to improve coexistence in the centre and mediating in the resolution of conflicts; collaborating with the social services and in community projects.

An important objective of the programme is the eradication of truancy. For this reason, the school promoter collaborates with the truancy commissions at different levels – centre, municipality, among others – and with the networks of services, entities and programmes organised in each municipality. Special emphasis is placed on the actions designed for this purpose, such as facilitating guidance and information for families with truant children about the schooling of their children; reinforcement and monitoring of truant students and their families, and systematic collection of information in a shared work plan.

The school promoter acts as an external professional in schools and usually goes to several schools in their educational area, adapting their interventions to the needs and characteristics of each school, bearing in mind that the schools assigned are usually highly complex. Thus, the school promoter interviewed indicates that, of the four areas of intervention described, she focuses her actions on pupils and families. «In each school it is a bit different because each centre is different and works in a different way, but it ends up being more or less the same [...] it is mainly carried out with families and Roma students» (DESP40W2024). For example, although the functions of the school promoter include preventing violence and promoting coexistence and social cohesion, they are frequently called upon to resolve conflicts or problems that have arisen in the school. As one promoter told us, her role was primarily that of a *fire extinguisher*. Also, the fact that their work is shared between several centres hinders the development of prevention and awareness-raising projects and actions, as well as monitoring these actions and real collaboration with the teaching team and other professionals, not to mention the barriers within the education system itself.

Many Roma families do not feel part of the school. They do not feel they belong there and see it as something against their culture and customs. Of course, despite our work, the children end up disengaging from the school system (OSE46W2024).

We are moving forward, I am optimistic, we are making small steps but we are making progress, but sometimes an inappropriate comment from a teacher invalidates our work and we have to start again. [...] It is a hard job, and in addition to the direct work with the families and the students, the training of the teachers is very necessary (DESP40W2024).

Regarding the assessment of the School Promotion Project for the Roma People, the Department of Education of the Generalitat of Catalonia (2024) supervises all the project. In this sense, it carries out a joint annual evaluation with the Pere Closa Foundation, supervised by the educational inspectorate, with the participation of schools, school promoters and educational services.

The assessment criteria of the School Promotion Project for the Roma People (Department of Education, 2019) show that it takes into account the number of centres, families and pupils attended to; the rate of absenteeism; the rate of improvement in the daily attendance of pupils; the increase in the expectations of pupils and families to achieve educational success; the participation of families in the school; information and guidance for pupils and families on complementary, extracurricular and leisure activities; information for families about the enrolment process, grants and aid; continuity of studies between stages and in post-compulsory education; the promotion of positive relationships between pupils and conflict management; the development of strategies to work with absent pupils who return to the classroom; the development of preventive action, intervention and monitoring of the schooling of Roma pupils; the adaptation of the school management documentation to provide an educational response to Roma pupils; the coordination of the school promoter with the educational service and the schools and, finally, the dissemination of good or specific practices. The interviewees also highlight the social impact generated in other socio-educational agents as a result of the awareness-raising work carried out by the promoters.

Thanks to this work done by the promoter, there are now teachers and other professionals who understand the idiosyncrasies of the Romany population, and that

they have unique characteristics and their values must be respected, therefore pupils cannot be attended to in a homogeneous, automatic way, personalised plans must be designed (DET37W2023).

To conclude, from the documentation analysed and the interviews carried out, a positive assessment of the school promotion project can be deduced – for example, the truancy rates of Roma pupils have dropped considerably in recent years –, as well as the figure of the school promoter and the actions carried out. However, challenges remain, such as the continuity in post-compulsory studies of Roma pupils, especially girls, or the incorporation of Roma culture and values into the school curriculum beyond specific actions, or the incorporation of this professional figure in the staff of the centres.

Discussion and conclusions

The communication channels most commonly used in communication between schools and Roma families tend to be collective meetings – at the beginning of the school year – and individual meetings – interviews or tutorials –, the school diary, circulars – either on paper or by digital means –, as well as more informal communication – direct and personal contact, especially at the beginning and end of the school day and by telephone. The role of pupils as mediators in school-family communication is also highlighted, as well as that of other socio-educational professionals. The results are presented in other studies (Garreta and Llevot, 2022). However, the ethnographic study was completed in 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when new measures were adopted in the centres, such as restrictions on space and time and limitations on access to the centres. Communication channels with families had to be adapted, which led to an exponential increase in the use of new technologies. The most common means of contacting families during this period were email, messaging through the educational platforms of the schools, videoconferencing, WhatsApp groups, telephone and video calls. However, some professionals warn of the danger of the so-called digital divide in the case of some families of minority origin, including Roma families, due to their lack of knowledge of new technologies, not having computer equipment or Internet at home or simply being excluded from family WhatsApp groups (Bernad and Llevot, 2018).

With regard to minority families, in our case Roma families, the importance of personal contacts is particularly noteworthy, taking advantage of moments at the beginning and end of the school day and even in the street, whether to make a sporadic consultation, provide information or simply to talk, and also telephone calls. An interesting note, in this perspective, are the natural and professional mediators (Llevot and Garreta, 2024). During the pandemic, educators and social integrators played a fundamental role in acting as a link between the schools and families. Some professionals in the schools included in the ethnographic study report how, during periods of confinement, they communicated with families in the street or in parks, and even visited their homes to leave messages, explanatory notes and homework dossiers in their letterboxes. In this line, school promoters also played a crucial role, working with school staff to explain to families the educational situation and the new organisation of class groups, as well as entry and exit procedures and precautionary measures to be taken. They also helped families to overcome their fears and uncertainties, seeing the school as a place of safety and well-being for their children. They emphasised the importance of attending class whenever possible and of being involved in educational follow-up, especially when the class group was confined. In addition, they provided school professionals with a better knowledge of Roma pupils and their families, as well as the particularities of Roma

culture, promoting respect and understanding from a perspective of equality and equal opportunities, but also of respect for differences.

Focusing now on the figure of the school promoter, we briefly review the School Promotion Project from its inception to the present day. The Department of Education of the Generalitat de Catalunya, based on the established legal framework and in accordance with the 2009-2013 Integral Plan for the Romany Population promoted by the government, created the School Promotion Project in 2005 with the aim of promoting equal opportunities, equity, inclusion and social cohesion.

The Pere Closa Foundation was chosen as a collaborating entity and as was the option of the semi-professional mediator, with initial and continuous training – even with the cutbacks that this figure has undergone. The aim was to achieve full schooling of Roma students in the different stages of the education system through prevention, diagnosis and preventive action to avoid absenteeism and school failure. Then to contribute to school success and the socio-occupational promotion of Roma students and promote the visibility and values of Roma culture in the school curriculum and the life of the centre in an inclusive, welcoming and open school. This is linked to projects to improve methodological and organisational strategies (Llevot and Bernad, 2016). Thus, the figure of the *school promoter* was born and, at present, there are 30 professionals, distributed around different municipalities in Catalonia with Roma families. In addition to the Department of Education of the Generalitat de Catalunya and the Pere Closa Foundation, the school promotion project currently has the collaboration of other public institutions and the councils of the municipalities where it is being applied.

To cite a figure for the 2022/23 school year, the school promotion programme acted in more than 140 schools, attending to almost 3,500 pupils and reaching more than 2,300 families. As a strong point, the impact of this intervention is facilitating the transformation of the entire social and educational fabric around Roma pupils and their families, generating new expectations in education and promoting, ultimately, to increasing numbers of Roma students in post-compulsory studies. Another strong point is raising awareness about Roma culture and the needs of Roma students and their families among educational and non-educational staff in schools. Along these lines, Franconetti, coordinator of the area of Support for School Promotion at the Pere Closa Foundation, highlights the positive impact generated by school promoters on other socio-educational agents (Pere Closa Foundation, n.d.). Through the awareness-raising work carried out by the promoters, there is a group of educational agents – social educators, social workers, social integration technicians – who understand that there is a singularity in the Roma community and that not all pupils can be attended to in a homogeneous way. The improvement of coexistence and conflict management in the school environment is also highlighted, as well as the incipient construction of more solid relationships based on mutual trust and communication channels.

However, despite this important progress, the results of the studies also show that more work is required. Thus, although some schools, especially those with more Roma students, recognise cultural diversity in their documentation and implement innovative actions, there are also some challenges. One such is to use school mediation as a preventive action, not only in temporary situations. Although the functions of the school promoter cover many fields, in practice their work is limited to cases of absenteeism, tutoring meetings and the management of cultural or racist conflicts. Moreover, their presence is restricted to schools with a high concentration of Roma pupils, which significantly reduces awareness-raising work in the educational community as a whole. Another challenge is the scarce presence of the Romany language and culture in the school curriculum and in official documentation and projects. It is also essential to

improve communication with Roma families, fostering trust and involvement in their children's education. The persistence of stereotypes and negative attitudes among some teachers and *native* families towards Roma families continues to hinder the social and educational inclusion of these students. On the other hand, in the narratives of the people interviewed, small achievements emerge in the actions carried out both in the classroom and at the level of the school and its surroundings. These actions seek to improve relations between the school and families, as well as to foster greater attachment to the school and a feeling of belonging to the educational community.

With regard to Roma families, as other studies have highlighted (Carmona *et al.*, 2019), it is essential to avoid a single homogeneous view of the group. Within Roma families, as in other groups (Cerviño and Torrelles, 2023), there are different expectations, attitudes and perspectives towards their children's education and schools, as well as different views of their own group and culture. Analysing the ethnographic studies and interviews conducted in the two projects, it can be seen, for example, that some Roma families attach great importance to education. Although they often attribute a utilitarian value to it and sometimes feel unable to offer the necessary support for their children to continue their studies successfully, this view often contrasts with that of teachers and other professionals, who sometimes face extreme situations and lack the necessary resources to carry out their work with guarantees of success. In this context, collaboration with a Roma school mediator could be a key to closing this gap. Mediation could facilitate greater understanding and empathy between families and teachers, promoting a more inclusive and favourable environment for the educational success of Roma students (Llevot and Garreta, 2024). In addition, the figure of the school promoter can help to raise awareness among families about the importance of active participation in their children's education, becoming an essential bridge to fostering more effective collaboration between the school and the Roma community.

In conclusion, although specific actions have been implemented in some schools to foster understanding and respect for cultural diversity, trust and the participation of Roma families, there are still challenges to be addressed, such as improving school-family communication, or the use of school mediation as a preventive action. With regard to academic success, in addition to the expectations of families and teachers, there are other personal, family, social, economic and structural factors of the school itself and its environment to be taken into account (Vecina *et al.*, 2024). It is necessary to continue working on raising awareness and training educational staff, as well as promoting greater understanding and respect for Roma culture in the school environment, from a community perspective, establishing networks and collaboration between schools and other entities in the area.

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