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From Cultural Recognition to School Inclusion: A Reflective Appraisal of Roma Day

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Abstract

This paper presents the design, implementation and pedagogical appraisal of an intercultural educational activity conducted at a public primary school in Aetolia-Acarnania, Greece to mark International Roma Day. Its purpose is to examine how cultural recognition, collaboration and active participation were incorporated into the activity and to identify the possibilities and limitations that emerged in this particular school context. The paper adopts a descriptive and reflective educational-practice approach, drawing on planning documents, educational and audiovisual materials, pupil presentations and non-systematic pedagogical observations by the professionals involved. The activity combined experiential, collaborative and arts-based practices, including music, poetry, drama, dialogue and audiovisual material. The appraisal identifies cultural recognition, shared participation, multimodal expression and interdisciplinary collaboration as potentially useful principles for designing inclusive school practices. Because no pre- and post-activity measures were used and no direct research data were systematically collected from pupils or families, the conclusions concern the characteristics and feasibility of this practice rather than demonstrated effects on pupils' attitudes, self-confidence, sense of belonging or the wider school climate.

Keywords: Roma pupils, intercultural education, inclusive education, cultural identity, reflective pedagogical appraisal

1. Introduction

Ensuring equal opportunities for learning and participation for all pupils is a central priority of contemporary education systems and is directly linked to the principles of inclusive and intercultural education. Education is a fundamental human right and one of the most important social institutions for promoting social cohesion and democratic participation. Contemporary schools are expected to respond to an increasingly multicultural pupil population by creating an educational environment in which every pupil is recognised as an equal member of the school community and can participate meaningfully in the school's academic and social life. In this context, inclusive and intercultural education are key pedagogical approaches because they seek to remove exclusion, recognise diversity and establish conditions for the equal participation of all pupils (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; UNESCO, 2020).

Roma pupils continue to experience substantial educational and social inequalities at European and national levels. Successive reports by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights document persistent disparities in educational participation, completion and school segregation across European countries (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2022, 2025). Educational inclusion involves more than access to or physical presence in school; it also requires the removal of institutional and social barriers, meaningful participation and respect for pupils' cultural identity.

This paper presents and reflectively appraises an educational intervention conducted at a public primary school in Aetolia-Acarnania, Greece, to mark International Roma Day. The activity was designed to highlight the cultural identity of Roma pupils, create opportunities for collaboration between Roma and non-Roma pupils, and contribute to an inclusive school climate. Musical and dramatic performances, poems, dialogues and audiovisual

material were incorporated into the programme to provide opportunities for pupils' participation and cultural expression and to present diversity as an element that can enrich school life.

The purpose of this paper is to describe and critically appraise the intervention as an example of how principles of intercultural and inclusive education can be applied in practice. The analysis addresses two questions: (a) how cultural recognition, collaboration and opportunities for active participation were incorporated into the design of the activity, and (b) what possibilities and limitations emerged from implementing such an activity in a particular school context. These questions are descriptive and interpretive; they are not intended to measure effectiveness or attribute causal effects to the intervention.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Education of Roma Pupils and the Challenge of Equal Participation

Education is a fundamental human right and an essential condition for social participation, personal autonomy and social cohesion. According to UNESCO (2020), education must ensure equal access, participation and achievement for all pupils, irrespective of their social, cultural, linguistic or economic characteristics. Contemporary schools must therefore move beyond the mere coexistence of different groups and create conditions for meaningful participation and the recognition of diversity.

Roma communities have experienced serious educational inequalities across Europe. The EU Roma strategic framework identifies education and the fight against discrimination as central policy areas (European Commission, 2020). Findings from the 2024 Roma Survey show that disparities in educational completion and school segregation remain pronounced (FRA, 2025). These conditions should be examined in relation to historical, socioeconomic and institutional factors, as well as school practices, rather than attributed to the cultural characteristics of Roma communities.

Current approaches to the education of Roma pupils maintain that school inclusion cannot be reduced to pupils' physical presence in school. It also requires meaningful participation in learning, recognition of cultural and linguistic identity, and a school environment in which pupils can develop a sense of belonging. As Cummins (2001) notes, recognising pupils' language and cultural experiences is important for supporting their engagement in education and the development of a positive self-concept.

The education of Roma pupils is therefore not only a question of academic attainment. It is also connected with social inclusion, relationships of trust between schools and families, and the development of a school climate that supports the participation of every child. Collaboration among teachers, pupils, families and the wider community is an important principle in developing schools that respond to the needs of a diverse pupil population.

2.2 Intercultural and Inclusive Education as a Pedagogical Framework

Intercultural education recognises cultural and linguistic diversity as an element that can enrich education (Markou, 1997). Banks (2016) argues that it extends beyond the presentation of selected cultural elements and requires changes in educational content, teaching practices and power relations so that all pupils can participate equally and develop a critical understanding of social reality. For Roma pupils in particular, culturally responsive pedagogy should combine knowledge of Roma communities with relationships of trust and teachers' critical reflection, ensuring that cultural recognition is not reduced to occasional or folkloric representations (Lambrev, 2025; Meléndez-Luces & Couto-Cantero, 2021).

Inclusive education is founded on the principle that every pupil has the right to participate, learn and be accepted in the school environment. Booth and Ainscow (2011) explain that inclusion is not limited to supporting particular groups of pupils. Rather, it requires changes in school culture, practices and beliefs to reduce exclusion and expand opportunities for participation.

Experiential and collaborative forms of learning can broaden the ways in which pupils participate. Music, art, drama, storytelling and creative expression can provide pedagogical means of communication and interaction among pupils with different cultural experiences. Their use, however, should be accompanied by attention to voluntary participation, equal opportunities for involvement, the avoidance of stereotypical representations and connections with wider school practice. Roma pupils should not be expected to represent a single, supposedly homogeneous community, nor should responsibility for intercultural learning rest on them alone.

2.3 Highlighting Cultural Identity Through School

Cultural identity is an important aspect of every child's personal development and social positioning. As a social and pedagogical institution, the school can either support or undermine pupils' relationships with their cultural

heritage. When pupils' cultural experiences are recognised and incorporated meaningfully into learning, this may support their self-esteem, participation and sense of belonging (Nieto, 2010).

For Roma pupils in particular, the presence of Roma history, language, music and traditions in the school environment may provide opportunities for cultural recognition and expression. Such recognition need not lead to separation between groups; it can instead provide a starting point for dialogue and interaction. These interactions may create opportunities to question prejudice and promote relationships based on mutual respect, although their effects depend on the wider educational context and cannot be assumed from participation in a single activity.

Commemorative events such as International Roma Day can therefore serve as pedagogical opportunities to highlight cultural heritage and address questions of inclusion. Their value is not confined to the symbolic observance of a single day but depends on how they are connected with ongoing curricular work, critical reflection, meaningful pupil participation and sustained collaboration with families and the wider community. Without such continuity, there is a risk that cultural recognition remains occasional or primarily symbolic.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methodological Approach

This paper is structured as a documented description and reflective pedagogical appraisal of an educational practice implemented in an authentic school setting. This approach was selected to present the context, design, implementation process and pedagogical dimensions of the activity transparently. It is not a full research case study, as no protocol for the systematic collection, coding and triangulation of data was applied. Consequently, the paper does not evaluate the intervention's effectiveness or seek to demonstrate causal changes in pupils or the school climate.

This approach supports a detailed presentation of the context and connects educational practice with the principles of intercultural and inclusive education. Whether the observations can inform practice in other school settings depends on the similarity of their circumstances and does not amount to statistical or analytical generalisation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The object of the appraisal is the specific intercultural activity conducted at a public primary school in Aetolia-Acarnania, Greece. The analysis considers how the individual activities relate to cultural recognition, active participation and inclusive education. It does not attempt to measure changes in pupils' attitudes, behaviour, self-confidence or engagement with school.

The sources considered were the activity plan and description, the educational and audiovisual material produced, pupils' presentations, and the pedagogical observations made by the professionals during preparation and implementation. The observations were not gathered through a structured protocol, recorded as verbatim pupil accounts or subjected to formal thematic coding. The analysis was descriptive and interpretive: features of the activity were mapped onto concepts from the theoretical framework and examined in relation to their pedagogical possibilities and limitations. The following appraisal therefore represents the authors' evidence-informed interpretations rather than independently verified findings about pupil outcomes.

3.2 Ethics

The activity was conducted as part of the school's educational programme and was not designed as a research study. The manuscript provides a descriptive and reflective account based on the activity plan, educational materials and the retrospective professional reflections of the practitioners involved. Pupil presentations and pedagogical observations are mentioned only to describe the content and implementation of the activity; they were not systematically recorded, coded or analysed as research data. No questionnaires, interviews, individual pupil records or outcome measures were used. No names, images, direct quotations or individual-level information concerning ethnicity or other sensitive characteristics are reported. The manuscript makes no claims about the effectiveness of the activity or about changes in pupils' attitudes, behaviour or sense of belonging.

3.3 Setting and Participants

The educational intervention took place at a public primary school in Aetolia-Acarnania, Greece, during the 2024–2025 school year as part of activities intended to raise the school community's awareness of International Roma Day. The school is a multicultural educational setting attended by pupils with diverse social, cultural and linguistic experiences.

The school community includes pupils from the local Roma community. No individual-level information on ethnic identity was recorded or used for this appraisal, and pupils were not counted or classified by ethnic

background. This contextual description therefore does not assume that the school community is culturally uniform or fixed.

Roma and non-Roma pupils from different grades took part in the activity. Because this was an educational activity organised by the school rather than a research intervention, the number and ages of participating pupils and their distribution by grade were not recorded separately. Pupils could contribute to presentations and artistic activities, while their shared participation was intended to create opportunities for communication and collaboration.

Teachers, school leaders and specialist educational personnel contributed to the design and implementation of the activity. Their collaboration gave the activity an interdisciplinary character and helped connect educational practice with pupils' social and emotional support. Although Roma pupils participated in the programme, members of the wider Roma community were not involved in the design of the event.

3.4 Design and Implementation of the Educational Intervention

The intervention was designed to mark International Roma Day, which is observed internationally on 8 April, and was held on 9 April 2025. It formed part of the school's efforts to promote intercultural education, an inclusive school culture and opportunities for pupils to participate in school life.

The intervention aimed to highlight aspects of Roma cultural identity through artistic and educational activities relating to history, language, music and traditions. It also sought to create opportunities for dialogue about diversity, equality and stereotypical representations.

The activity was organised by school professionals in accordance with principles of intercultural and inclusive education. Preparation took place over several weeks and included classroom discussions, the organisation of the programme and rehearsals. Pupils had opportunities to express preferences and contribute suggestions regarding elements of the activities and their forms of presentation. These contributions were considered during the preparation process, where feasible and appropriate. Particular attention was given to voluntary participation and to avoiding the assumption that any pupil should represent the Roma community as a whole. Although Roma pupils participated in the programme and contributed to its preparation and presentation, members of the wider Roma community were not involved in the design of the event.

The programme incorporated different forms of expression, including poetry readings, musical performances, dramatic representation, dialogue and audiovisual material. These included poems by Roma pupils expressing their thoughts on identity, school life and aspirations; a dialogue in Greek and Romani performed by two Roma pupils from Grade 3; and a dialogue about friendship between a Roma boy and a non-Roma girl from the same grade. The programme also included the traditional Roma song "Sar Penen" ("How Do You Say It?"), performed by Grade 4 pupils together with Roma pupils from the school, and "Jastar Amenge Dur" ("Let's Go Far Away"), performed by Roma pupils.

In addition, pupils presented a theatrical and musical representation of the Ederlezi spring celebration. Audiovisual material addressed everyday experiences of school inclusion, Roma individuals who had achieved educational and professional success, and messages from Roma artists encouraging pupils to continue their education and emphasising the importance of knowledge. A Roma pupil also demonstrated musical skills by playing the tumberleki. Together, these elements provided different opportunities for cultural expression and participation within the school setting.

4. Pedagogical Appraisal and Discussion

The activity created an organised setting in which pupils could participate in shared intercultural activities and present selected cultural elements. Active involvement was observed during preparation and presentation activities. This observation concerns behaviour within the particular activity and is insufficient to demonstrate improved self-confidence, changed attitudes or a more enduring connection with the school community. Such outcomes would require direct and systematic investigation of pupils' perspectives before, during and after the intervention.

The programme included several activities designed to make Roma pupils' cultural and linguistic identities visible within the school environment. Roma pupils presented poems expressing their thoughts about identity, school life and their aspirations. Two Roma pupils from Grade 3 performed a short everyday dialogue in Greek and Romani, highlighting the use of Romani as a language of communication and cultural expression. Another activity involved a dialogue about friendship between a Roma boy and a non-Roma girl from the same grade, addressing shared experiences and the importance of cooperation. In addition, pupils from Grade 4 and Roma pupils from the school performed the traditional song "Sar Penen," while a theatrical and musical presentation of

Ederlezi, a spring celebration associated with Roma communities, introduced the audience to a cultural tradition. The programme also included a performance of another traditional song, "Jastar Amenge Dur," by Roma pupils, as well as a presentation of a pupil's talent in playing the tumberleki. These activities provided concrete opportunities for pupils to express aspects of cultural identity through poetry, language, music and performance.

Highlighting cultural identity is theoretically connected with intercultural education, as schools are expected to recognise pupils' linguistic and cultural experiences and incorporate them meaningfully into learning (Cummins, 2001). In this activity, Roma history, language, music, poetry and traditions were given a visible place in the school programme. This may be interpreted as a practice of cultural recognition, but it does not in itself establish that pupils' sense of belonging increased.

The joint preparation and presentation of activities by Roma and non-Roma pupils provided opportunities for contact and collaboration. The performance of "Sar Penen" involved pupils from Grade 4 alongside Roma pupils from the school, while the dialogue about friendship brought a Roma boy and a non-Roma girl together in a shared presentation. These examples illustrate how intercultural interaction was incorporated into the programme. Intergroup contact theory suggests that contact may be associated with more positive attitudes when it involves equal status, common goals, cooperation and institutional support (Allport, 1954). Collaboration and support from the school were evident in the design of this activity. However, no data were collected that would allow an assessment of whether participants experienced equal status or whether prejudice changed.

The use of music, poetry, drama, dialogue and audiovisual material broadened the available forms of participation and gave pupils different means of expression. In addition to the live performances, the programme included audiovisual material on inclusion and participation in school, accounts of educational and professional achievements by Roma individuals, and messages from Roma artists encouraging pupils to continue their education. This multimodal approach is consistent with inclusive pedagogy insofar as it offers different ways to participate and express oneself (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Whether every pupil actually experienced the activity as accessible and safe remains a question for future systematic investigation.

The presentation of positive role models from the Roma community through audiovisual material added a counter-stereotypical dimension to the activity. Nevertheless, it is pedagogically important to avoid replacing negative stereotypes with idealised or one-dimensional narratives of success. Presenting varied experiences and life paths, together with critical discussion of institutional barriers and anti-Roma racism, may support a fuller understanding of social reality.

The involvement of members of the school community strengthened the collective character of the intervention and made the school's commitment to cultural recognition visible. As no data were collected from families, it cannot be inferred that the activity strengthened relationships between the school and families. The literature nevertheless emphasises that relationships of trust and meaningful community participation are essential conditions for culturally responsive education (Lambrev, 2025).

International Roma Day can provide a starting point for visibility and dialogue, but there is a risk that intercultural education will be confined to a commemorative and folkloric event. Its pedagogical value depends on continuity: whether cultural and linguistic diversity is incorporated into the curriculum, everyday relationships, decision-making, and collaboration with families and the community (UNESCO, 2020).

Overall, the appraisal indicates that the activity was feasible in this particular school context and that its design included elements consistent with intercultural and inclusive pedagogy. The examples presented above illustrate the forms of participation and cultural expression incorporated into the programme. This interpretation concerns the intervention's structure and process. It does not demonstrate effectiveness in reducing prejudice, promoting empowerment or changing the school climate.

5. Limitations of the Appraisal

The paper concerns a single activity in one school and relies primarily on the perspectives of the professionals who designed and implemented the intervention. It involved no comparison group, pre- and post-activity measurement, structured observation protocol or independent evaluator. The views of pupils and families were not gathered systematically, and the persistence of any possible changes over time was not examined. In addition, the authors' dual roles as school professionals and appraisers of the activity may have encouraged positive interpretations and selective attention to successful moments.

A further limitation concerns the involvement of the wider Roma community in the planning and design of the activity. Although Roma pupils from the school actively participated in the programme, members of the wider Roma community were not involved in shaping its content or implementation. The programme did, however,

include an audiovisual message from Roma artists encouraging pupils to continue their education. While this provided a positive contribution to the event, it did not constitute active community participation in the planning process. Future initiatives could involve Roma parents, community representatives and Roma cultural practitioners in selecting content, planning activities and defining educational objectives. Such involvement could support more participatory approaches to intercultural education and ensure that the representation of Roma cultures reflects a diversity of perspectives.

These limitations mean that the conclusions should be understood as reflective, pedagogically informed observations rather than empirical evidence of effectiveness. Future evaluations could use a prospective design, clear process indicators, anonymous and age-appropriate pupil feedback, family perspectives, systematic observations by several evaluators and longer-term follow-up. They could also examine how the involvement of Roma families and community representatives in the design and implementation of activities shapes pupils' experiences and the perceived relevance of the programme.

6. Conclusions

This descriptive and reflective paper presents a feasible school-based practice that made aspects of Roma history, language and cultural expression visible and created opportunities for Roma and non-Roma pupils to participate in shared activities. Through poetry, dialogue in Greek and Romani, music, dramatic representation, and audiovisual material, the activity incorporated multiple forms of cultural expression into the school programme. It illustrates how cultural recognition, multimodal expression and interdisciplinary collaboration can inform the design of a school intervention grounded in intercultural and inclusive pedagogy.

The paper's main contribution is not evidence of changes in pupils or the school climate, but a detailed account of a practice and its critical connection with intercultural and inclusive pedagogy. The active participation observed during the activity indicates engagement with this particular form of school activity; it is not evidence of empowerment, an increased sense of belonging or reduced prejudice.

To extend beyond a commemorative event, similar initiatives should be connected with the daily curriculum, critical discussion of anti-Roma racism and inequality, pupils' sustained participation in decision-making, and reciprocal collaboration with families and community members. Cultural recognition becomes meaningful when it is combined with the removal of barriers to participation and sustained efforts to transform school culture.

The experience also highlights the importance of involving the wider Roma community in the planning and development of intercultural activities. Although Roma pupils participated in the programme and Roma artists contributed through an audiovisual message encouraging educational continuation, members of the wider Roma community were not involved in the design process. Future activities should therefore be developed, from the outset, in collaboration with pupils, families and Roma community representatives, in order to support meaningful participation and reduce the risk of external or stereotypical representations of Roma cultures.

A more systematic and ethically grounded evaluation could investigate the experiences of different participants and possible changes in attitudes, relationships and sense of belonging. Such evaluation could also examine how sustained collaboration with Roma families and community representatives contributes to the relevance, inclusiveness and continuity of school-based initiatives.

Under these conditions, this experience may offer useful guidance to schools seeking to move from symbolic references to diversity towards more sustained, participatory and critically reflective practices of inclusion.

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