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Universitat  
Pompeu Fabra  
Barcelona



# Roma inclusion in education:

Fostering constructive attitudes and good practices in the Barcelona area  
(VAKERIPEN)



## Final project report by GRITIM-UPF

FUNDACIÓ PRIVADA

Pere Closa

PER A LA FORMACIÓ I LA PROMOCIÓ DELS GITANOS A CATALUNYA



Rromane Siklörne



Ajuntament de  
Barcelona





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Universitat  
Pompeu Fabra  
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## Report based on the findings from the project

# ROMA INCLUSION IN EDUCATION: FOSTERING CONSTRUCTIVE ATTITUDES AND GOOD PRACTICES IN THE BARCELONA AREA (VAKERIPEN)

Co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union under Grant Agreement JUST/2015/RDIS/AG/DISC/9372.

Duration: January 2017-June 2018.

## Project website

<https://www.upf.edu/web/gritim/international-project-roma-inclusion-in-education>

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GRITIM-UPF, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, November 2018.



# Foreword

Vakeripen is a collaborative project by the research group GRITIM-UPF at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, together with the Roma associations Fundació Privada Pere Closa and Rromane Siklövne. It was carried out from January 2017 until June 2018, with the main objective to promote inclusion in education of Roma children in Barcelona through dialogue between schools and Roma families. In Romani language, the word “vakeripen” means conversation. It is the Romani term that is closest to “communication,” which has been a key concept in this project. The project combined research with practical implementation, aiming to expand the work in the field of Roma inclusion both through developing networks and practical work methods, and at the level of generating knowledge, in order to combat the exclusion and school failure that affect Roma pupils disproportionately.

Before proceeding to describe our activities, findings and conclusions, I would like to say a few words about something essential that we have learned: the huge difference between accepting to participate in a project, and to feel engaged and believe that it will actually make a difference. It must be taken into account that many Roma people are used to participating in different projects, which they may sometimes perceive apply a top-down perspective, and “study their problems” without any clear benefits for themselves. Thanks to our Roma partners Miguel Ángel Franconetti and Pedro Casermeiro, and our many encounters with Roma families, school staff and intermediary actors in the neighbourhoods of La Mina, Sant Roc, Bon Pastor and El Gornal, we became much aware of this risk, and of the necessity to think outside the box as researchers, to be able to enter the field with a truly equitable approach, creating relations built on trust and reciprocity.

It would indeed be conceited to claim that we have managed to incite a positive development in these neighbourhoods. There are many challenges at multiple levels, ranging from the prevalence of negative stereotypes, to precariousness and segregation. As we conclude the project, I can however say with certainty that much can be accomplished through constructive communication; through actually listening to the other and trying to understand, to support, and to expect the best. O vakeripen kramavel.

*Zenia Hellgren, Barcelona, November 2018*

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We want to thank all the Roma families from the neighbourhoods Sant Roc, La Mina, Bon Pastor and El Gornal for their engagement in our project, as well as the headmasters and teachers of the schools Institut-Escola de Sant Adrià in La Mina, Escuela El Gornal, Institut-Escola El Til·ler in Bon Pastor, and the schools Baldomer Solà y Josep Boada in Sant Roc. For their great collaboration we also thank Mercedes Gómez from Lacho Bají Calí, María Jiménez and Conchi from Asociación Gitana de Badalona, Daniel Martínez from Casal Cívic de La Mina, Sara Mas, Nieves Heredia and Marta Bonet, and of course our partners Miguel Ángel Franconetti from Fundació Privada Pere Closa and Pedro Casermeiro from Rromane Siklörvne, who played an absolutely fundamental role through creating engagement and trust among the participating Roma families. They recruited the participants and took charge of the practical implementation: planning, organizing and executing the different activities involving school staff and Roma families.

Moreover, we very much appreciate the support of Lola López, Aida Guillén and Silvia Serra from the Barcelona City Council, Manel Mor from the Catalan Department of Education, and the director of the Office for Non-discrimination in Barcelona, Albert Fagés and his co-workers.



*Celebrating the International Roma Day on April 8<sup>th</sup> in El Gornal. Zenia Hellgren and Lorenzo Gabrielli from GRITIM, Lola López from the Barcelona City Council, Mercedes Gómez from the collaborating association Lacho Bají Calí, and other local Roma activists.*



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## Executive summary

The main objective of this project, which combines qualitative research with practical implementation, was to establish constructive and lasting channels of communication between Roma families and schools in four neighbourhoods in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, with high proportions of Roma population and significant problems with school failure: La Mina, Sant Roc, Bon Pastor and El Gornal. Specifically, we aimed to create awareness-raising among school teachers and other school staff, in order to combat negative stereotypes of Roma families, and simultaneously to promote a positive attitude towards education through awareness-raising among Roma families.



*Domi Viñas, headmaster of the school El Til·ler, Pedro Casermeiro from Rromane Siklövne, Marta del Campo, headmaster of the school Institut-Escola de Sant Adrià, Zenia Hellgren, PI of the project, Miguel Ángel Franconetti from Fundació Privada Pere Closa, and Lola López, commissioner of Immigration, Interculturalism and Diversity at the Barcelona City Council, during the closing conference of Vakeripen at UPF on June 15, 2018.*

Throughout the project, we have provided forums for teacher training, dialogue and exchange between Roma families and Roma community representatives, schools and local authorities in the Barcelona area, at all times guided by principles of reciprocity. In three of the target neighbourhoods, we organized a series of teacher training sessions in collaboration with the Catalan Department of Education (Ensenyament), with emphasis on increasing awareness and sensitivity to the life situations of the Roma families, as well as the importance of including Roma culture and history in the school material, in order to make these pupils and their families feel better represented. We also had several meetings with headmasters, teachers and intermediary actors (Roma school mediators, social

integrators, and representatives from local associations) in all four neighbourhoods, to discuss measures to improve the school situation of Roma youth and the communication with their families.

## Implemented activities

The implementation part of the project was based on a series of workshops and dialogue sessions with Roma families and school staff, with the purpose of learning about the difficulties in communication that both parties encountered, and try to find ways to bridge these obstacles. While our partners organized the practical activities, gave chats and functioned as monitors, the GRITIM-UPF research team performed participant observations and in-depth interviews with the participants. Throughout the project activities, our emphasis lay on the exchange of experiences, thoughts and concerns. The meetings with Roma mothers and fathers had the format of talks, in most cases, or in some cases of practical workshops as building flamenco boxes, providing IT training or organizing a football game with parents and teachers. The main purpose of such more practical activities was to bring the school closer to these parents, who are often not used to entering the school venue, in order to construct a relaxed atmosphere and prepare for conversations. Altogether, 57 dialogue meetings and workshops with Roma parents were organized in the four neighbourhoods during 2017 and 2018.



*Dialogue meeting with talks about education and expectations, with Roma mothers in La Mina, May 2018.*



We were conscious about the importance of maintaining a reciprocal, respectful and participative attitude at the meetings, and employed a participant and egalitarian approach as researchers, at all times avoiding a “top-down” perspective. We believe that this approach has been crucial to gain acceptance by both the Roma participants and the schools, and that it played a central role for the positive relationships that were built during the project to last after its termination, providing a fertile ground for future collaboration.

Besides the dialogue meetings and workshops with Roma families and school staff, and the teacher training and awareness-raising sessions in Sant Roc, La Mina and El Gornal, we also maintained several meetings with the Catalan Department of Education, and organized a half-day seminar together with the Office for Non-discrimination in Barcelona. The objective with this seminar was to promote better contacts between the Roma communities and representatives of the public administration of Barcelona, and inform the Roma communities, through their representatives as links and spokespersons of their concerns, about the existing non-discrimination policies and programs, in order to empower the Roma people and make them aware of their rights and the possibilities to take actions against discrimination. A substantial part of this meeting was dedicated to the narratives of the participating Roma representatives, who gave several detailed accounts on the types of discrimination that they suffer frequently in supermarkets and clothes stores, at the entrance of public swimming pools or restaurants, and, perhaps most severely, in their attempts to find employment.



*Workshop at the Office for Non-discrimination in Barcelona with GRITIM-UPF, Roma representatives and representatives from Barcelona City Council, June 2018.*



We discussed the enormous gap that there is between anti-discrimination legislation and norms on the one hand, and the remaining widespread discrimination of the Roma in Catalan society on the other hand. Everyone agreed that accomplishing change largely appears to be a matter of education and awareness-raising among the majority society. At the end of the meeting, we concluded that there is much work to be done for the Office for Non-discrimination, who is giving increasing priority to the specific field of discrimination against the Roma.

## Results and impact

Except the project team, our project had 231 direct participants: 80 Roma mothers and fathers, 132 school staff members and 19 intermediary actors as local Roma associations and mediators. Besides direct participation, the activities organized within the framework of this project are expected to benefit the entire Roma communities, as the Roma people who participate in the project are expected to take their experiences back to their local communities and promote more positive attitudes towards active participation in the contacts with schools. Simultaneously, awareness-raising of teachers is expected to resonate both in the schools who participate in the project, and at the broader level of school networks in Catalonia and the Catalan educational system. Moreover, we have disseminated the project among local academics and policy-makers through workshops and meetings. The topic of Roma inclusion was also included in the *Master in Migration studies programme* at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, at the course “Diversity, Discrimination and Citizenship” that is given by the PI of the project, thus influencing the students of this program.

Based on our empirical findings, we formulated some policy recommendations and suggestions for schools, which were recently published in the [GRITM-UPF policy series](#) (Hellgren and Gabrielli, 2018<sup>1</sup>).

We also believe that we managed to contribute to improve the attitudes towards each other among the Roma families and the schools in at least some of the target neighbourhoods. Particularly in one of the four target neighbourhoods, we were able to develop a constructive collaboration with the local Roma families and the school, providing a structure of meetings and workshops to bring them

<sup>1</sup> Hellgren, Z. and Gabrielli, L. (2018) Promoting realistic expectations: Roma inclusion in the Catalan education system. GRITIM-UPF Policy Brief, no. 8, 2018.



closer together. For instance, the local Roma association in this neighbourhood, where several of the parents are active, and the Parents' Association (AMPA) of the school stated that the project has opened doors for them, making the school and the educational authorities more willing to grant access and let them take on a more active role in managing issues related to the direction of the school. In addition, the school staff from three of the neighbourhoods was explicit about how we made them reflect constructively around how the communication with the families function at present, and how they could work to become more inclusive. In the fourth neighbourhood, the situation was more challenging, with overall more reluctant attitudes among the school staff. Here, we developed a close relation with the focus group of Roma families that participated in our workshops and dialogue sessions. We brought up their concerns during the subsequent implementation of our teacher training program in this district (see below). Nevertheless, the participating school staff's reactions overall reflected the large communicative distance between the Roma families and the schools that we found in this neighbourhood throughout our study.

In addition, our project generated the following results:

**We developed a pilot teacher training and awareness-raising program** in collaboration with the Catalan Department of Education, which was implemented in schools in the neighbourhoods of Sant Roc, La Mina and El Gornal during October 2017-February 2018.

We **collaborated with the local authorities in Barcelona** through our participation as advisors in elaborating the Barcelona City Council's plan against anti-gypsyism, and we were invited to present our results at the [EUROCITIES Roma inclusion working group meeting<sup>2</sup>](#) that they organized in May, 2018.

And finally, we reached the **key conclusion**, based on our empirical findings, that the Roma families (contrary to widespread perceptions and stereotypes) do not have low expectations on the education of their children, but that school staff tend to think that they do, which indicates that a better communication between the two parties is fundamental. We also recommended the inclusion of Roma history and role models in the educational system. These results were [disseminated by Spanish media<sup>3</sup>](#) in May 2018.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.upf.edu/web/gritim/news/-asset\\_publisher/GcldyAQFCyDE/content/id/213215018/maximized#.W-7tfjj0m70](https://www.upf.edu/web/gritim/news/-asset_publisher/GcldyAQFCyDE/content/id/213215018/maximized#.W-7tfjj0m70)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.upf.edu/web/gritim/news/-/asset\\_publisher/GcldyAQFCyDE/content/id/213366018/maximized#.W-7tmjj0m70](https://www.upf.edu/web/gritim/news/-/asset_publisher/GcldyAQFCyDE/content/id/213366018/maximized#.W-7tmjj0m70)



For further information about our implemented activities, see the project website:  
<https://www.upf.edu/web/gritim/project-news-and-activities>.



*Pedro Casermeiro from Rromane Siklörne teaches Roma parents in El Gornal about the Roma language and history, which most are not familiar with. February 2018.*



# Research task

## 1. Introduction

In the Executive summary above, we briefly outlined the results of the project's practical implementation. In the following parts of the report, we will focus on the results of our research task. This project was designed to improve the problematic school situation of Roma children and youth by focusing on parental involvement and teacher training and awareness-raising, in order to foster constructive attitudes and good practices. It addressed the negative attitudes towards Roma people that are frequent within the educational system and the majority society institutions in general, and simultaneously the lack of trust in the majority society and its institutions that is widespread among the Roma communities in the Barcelona area, who are affected by serious socio-economic marginalization and disintegration. Based on both earlier research and many years of practical experience in the field by the two partner organizations in this project, Fundació Privada Pere Closa and Rromane Siklövne, we highlighted as particularly worrying the denominated school failure of Roma children and youth: absenteeism, poor academic results and overrepresentation among early school drop-outs. And the current situation of Roma pupils in Spain and Catalonia is indeed alarming: 64% of Roma youth between 16 and 24 did not complete their compulsory secondary education, compared to 13% for the population as a whole. The absenteeism rate of Spanish Roma pupils is 26.4%, and only around 2% of young Roma between 18 and 24 years hold qualifications gained beyond compulsory education, whereas this rate across Spanish society is at 42% (*Fundación Secretariado Gitano*, report 2013<sup>4</sup>; meetings with Pere Closa and Rromane Siklövne during 2017 and 2018; Requena Hidalgo, 2003<sup>5</sup>; Obra Social La Caixa, report 2010<sup>6</sup>; Ajuntament de Barcelona, policy document 2015<sup>7</sup>).

<sup>4</sup> Fundación Secretariado Gitano, report 2013 Roma Students in Secondary Education in Spain: [https://www.gitanos.org/upload/28/78/Roma\\_Students\\_in\\_Secondary\\_Education\\_in\\_Spain\\_Executive\\_Summary.pdf](https://www.gitanos.org/upload/28/78/Roma_Students_in_Secondary_Education_in_Spain_Executive_Summary.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Requena Hidalgo, Jesús (2003): "La peor casa en el peor barrio". Barrios de inmigración y marginalidad en la periferia urbana de Barcelona. El caso de Badalona. En *Scripta Nova. Revista electrónica de geografía y ciencias sociales*. Barcelona: Universidad de Barcelona, vol. VII, nº 146(058). [http://www.ub.es/geocrit/sn/sn-146\(058\).htm](http://www.ub.es/geocrit/sn/sn-146(058).htm)

<sup>6</sup> Obra Social La Caixa, Col·lecció Estudis Socials Núm. 29, 2010: *Fracàs i abandonament escolar a Espanya*.





We know from earlier research that minority families with a low socio-economic position tend to have weak capabilities to support their children's education (e.g. Cebolla Boado, 2011<sup>8</sup>). For instance, they may themselves have a low educational level (which overall is true for the Roma communities in Spain) and lack adequate knowledge of the educational system, which makes it difficult for them to, for instance, supervise their children's homework (Rothstein, 2013<sup>9</sup>). Factors such as negative attitudes towards the majority society and a lack of trust in its institutions, or lacking support of higher studies, may also harm the opportunities of Roma children and youth. Research has shown that teachers' expectations have a strong effect for children's educational attainment, and that such expectations are partially formed on the basis of ethnicity (OECD, 2017<sup>10</sup>). The highly segregationist school system in Spain (polarized between public and privately run schools) contributes to Roma students being over-represented in low-prestige, segregated public schools, attended by teachers with a higher-than-average turnover rate and discouraged by low expectations (see Bereményi and Carrasco, 2015<sup>11</sup>). In line with Bereményi and Carrasco's findings (ibid), through our empirical work we have found that there is a gap between the Roma families' expectations on education and the schools' perception that Roma families are disengaged and have low expectations. We also found that many Roma families do not identify with the school or feel represented by the way things work there, and that the problems with early school abandonment, absenteeism and lacking participation of Roma families clearly need to be addressed also at the structural and institutional level, beyond the contacts between families and individual schools.

The key concept guiding this project has been *expectations*. We initially expected to focus on promoting higher expectations on education among the Roma families, but as our fieldwork proceeded, we discovered that the challenge rather appeared to be about, on the one hand, motivating teachers and other school staff to raise their expectations on the Roma students, and on the other hand, struggling to fulfil the Roma families' expectations. The families who

[https://multimedia.caixabank.es/lacaixa/ondemand/obrasocial/pdf/estudiossociales/vol29\\_completo\\_ca.pdf](https://multimedia.caixabank.es/lacaixa/ondemand/obrasocial/pdf/estudiossociales/vol29_completo_ca.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ajuntament de Barcelona (Barcelona City Council). *Estratègia local amb el poble gitano de Barcelona*, policy document. [http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/sites/default/files/arxius-documents/EstrategiaGITANO\\_DINA4\\_web.pdf](http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/sites/default/files/arxius-documents/EstrategiaGITANO_DINA4_web.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Cebolla Boado, Hector (2011) Primary and secondary effects in the explanation of disadvantage in education: the children of immigrant families in France, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 32:3, 407-430, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2011.559341

<sup>9</sup> Rothstein, R. (2013) Why Our Schools Are Segregated, in *Educational Leadership*, v70 n8 p50-55.

<sup>10</sup> OECD report (2017) *Catching Up? Intergenerational Mobility and Children of Immigrants*

<sup>11</sup> Bereményi, B.Á & Carrasco, S. (2015) Interrupted Aspirations: Research and Policy on Gitano Education in a Time of Recession in Spain. *Intercultural Education* Volume 26.1



participated in our project overall considered education as essential, since they perceived it as virtually the only possibility for their children to “get a better life” than themselves.

To foster and fulfil high expectations on the educational outcomes of Roma students, we believe that three complementary concepts capture the objectives we defined as necessary to work with in order to achieve an improvement. These concepts have played a key role throughout the implementation of our project: *communication*; *participation* (of both Roma families and school staff) and *representation* (of Roma people and culture in majority society institutions as the school system). The latter is considered necessary in order to increase the Roma children and families’ sense of identification with the education system, and to combat stereotypes of the Roma’s assumed disinterest in school.

## 2. Ethical issues

### 2.1. Reciprocity and Roma empowerment

Throughout the project, we placed much emphasis on building trust and on implementing all our activities from a perspective of reciprocity and mutual learning. At an initial stage of the project, we decided to use a complementary project name in Romani language, which also had a symbolic importance as part of Roma empowerment. “Vakeripen” (conversation) is the title that has been used when presenting the project to actors at the local, Catalan level. At an early stage of the project, we agreed with the partner organizations that we needed a project name that would be easier to relate to for the participants and other local actors. As English is not a language that most of these actors are familiar with, we also translated the descriptive title to Spanish for all communication and dissemination at the local level, so the project became known as: “*Vakeripen: Fomentando la inclusión escolar de los alumnos gitanos a través de las actitudes constructivas y las buenas practices.*”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Here, it is important to note that while the term “Roma” is still not commonly used in the Spanish context, the word “gitano” is. This word is indeed charged with many different stereotypes and several negative connotations, and may be used in discriminatory ways similar to the direct translation to English, “gypsy”. It is however the term preferred by the Spanish Roma themselves, and the participants of our project claimed not to identify with the term “Roma”, which is why we decided to use the word “gitano” in Spanish and Catalan project dissemination, and when citing project participants in this report.



We have all along been well aware of the particularly vulnerable situation of the Roma communities in the neighbourhoods where we implemented our project, characterized by high degrees of social exclusion, economic precariousness and school failure. Considering this, it has been fundamental for us to have an egalitarian approach in all contacts with the Roma families, avoiding a distant or “top-down” attitude. These people are used to being framed as a problem and to be the object of studies, but less so to be included and consulted about their views, as in this case on education. To adopt such an inclusionary and equitable approach was fundamental for us from an ethical point of view, but we also considered it central for the quality and relevance of the project results to make sure that participation in the project was perceived as useful for the participants. Moreover, it has been important to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality of the data we collected in order to build a relationship based on trust with the participants.

Some of the teachers expressed their concern that their identity would be revealed in publications or other forms of dissemination. They were for instance afraid to be portrayed in a negative way, as having failed to implement better educational strategies or as being prejudiced, among other concerns. We therefore also abandoned our initial idea to reveal what neighbourhood the respective interview persons represented, and decided to use a format that makes the comparative dimension of the different neighbourhoods less salient. Instead, we focus on the general features that these different neighbourhoods share, which indeed are many, and compare along other dimensions.

Finally, though children are not interviewed or included in the study, they were present at several of the workshops and meetings with the families. This was in line with the families’ wish to bring their children with them, and also due to practical reasons, as in many cases nobody else could take care of the children while we performed our activities. Therefore, we adapted some of the activities to be inclusive for the children (for instance doing homework together with some of the parents, while other parents were being interviewed). We also included childminding in the budget as part of the activities of the final conference<sup>13</sup>, so that the parents could attend the event while the children were being looked after in a room next to the conference hall.

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.upf.edu/web/gritim/news/-/asset\\_publisher/GcIdyAQFCyDE/content/id/213715524/maximized](https://www.upf.edu/web/gritim/news/-/asset_publisher/GcIdyAQFCyDE/content/id/213715524/maximized)



## 2.2. Mainstreaming

Throughout the project, we applied a gender perspective, and recognized that within the overall aim to empower Roma families/communities, empowering Roma women is an essential task. We departed from the understanding that Roma families are usually traditional in the sense that the man/father is typically the head of the family, while the women/mother functions as the primary caregiver and takes the main responsibility for the needs of the children. This view was also confirmed by our project partners who organized training in Roma culture/history and awareness-raising for us at the initial stage of the project. Therefore, to empower mothers was considered particularly important in a project that seeks to improve the school situation of Roma children, and we initially decided that at least half of the Roma family participants should be women (mothers). In practice, however, it was easier to reach and involve mothers than fathers, not because we found a lacking interest among the fathers (several fathers also participated in our activities and showed much interest and implication in their children's education), but because more of the mothers did not engage in any daily activities outside the household and had more time to spend on the project. We did however find that there was much variety considering the gender roles among the families involved, and it was stated over and over again by the Roma participants themselves that the Roma community is undergoing much change at present, towards more egalitarian gender roles in the home, and shared responsibility for the children.

Moreover, the project explicitly complied with the requirement to respect the rights and principles of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Non-discrimination and equal opportunities are essential parts of its core values and objectives, and the project was designed to offer equal employment opportunities by choosing partners of Roma origin, as well as an equal distribution of male and female co-workers.

## 3. Hypotheses and conceptual framework

The expectations that we formulated as we designed this project were initially very implementation-oriented and focused on the participation of and impact on the Roma families and school staff we recruited. Most importantly, we expected to contribute to foster better practices within the field of Roma inclusion in education, through an increasing awareness of destructive patterns of negative



stereotyping and mutual distrust between the Roma communities and the schools. Beyond the actual participants and the effects that their participation in the project will have for them and their close environment (as other family members and colleagues), we expected that the activities we organized within the framework of the project should benefit the Roma communities at a general level. For instance, the Roma participants (mothers, fathers and community representatives) were expected to share their experiences through their own social networks, and promote more positive attitudes towards education, and the public administration in general. Simultaneously, we expected that awareness-raising of teachers in the target neighbourhoods would resonate both in the schools that participate in the project, and at the broader level of school networks in Catalonia, influencing on their work methods to promote inclusion and improved school attainment of Roma children and youth.

At the research level, we applied an inductive approach and wanted to enter the field, to the extent this is possible, without preunderstandings influencing on our perceptions and expectations. This implies recognizing that researchers, just as other human beings, are bearers of a set of ideas and experiences and not free from prejudice, though by being aware of this we can avoid that it influences on our contact with the field (Aspers 2011; Merriam 1998<sup>14</sup>).

Roughly, it can be said that research either tests or generates hypotheses. The explorative qualitative research performed within this project has contributed to both generate and empirically examine a set of hypotheses. These hypotheses will be further examined, in relation to the conceptual framework that is being constructed based on our findings, in our forthcoming project publications:

- i) That Roma families, contrary to common perceptions, do not have low expectations on the education of their children.
- ii) That Roma families often do lack confidence in the positive results of higher studies, given their experiences of discrimination and disadvantage.
- iii) That school staff often tends to have low expectations on the educational interest and outcomes of Roma children.
- iv) That school staff risks to generalize and blame “Roma culture” for problems related to the schooling of Roma children.

<sup>14</sup> Aspers, P. (2011) *Etnografiska metoder*. Liber; Merriam, S. B. (1998) *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass





## 4. Methodology

In defining the methodology we applied in this project, we were inspired by mainly two qualitative approaches: participative action research (PAR) and grounded theory. First, participatory action research (PAR) emphasizes the active role of the researcher as part of the social realities he or she studies, with the objective of contributing to social change beyond merely understanding and interpreting their environment (McIntyre, 2008<sup>15</sup>). In order to understand how the Roma families and the school staff, respectively, perceived the worrying situation of widespread school failure, abandonment and absenteeism among Roma children and youth, it was necessary to share their experiences through participating in a range of activities, both observing and participating actively, maintaining both informal conversations and more formalized research interviews. From the deepened understanding acquired, and the constant exchange with the participants during the project, ideas of what changes were needed started to take shape. The participatory, change-oriented approach was an integrated part of the project from the beginning, in line with the PAR principle that this kind of research should “provide opportunities for co-developing processes *with* people rather than *for* people” (ibid: xii). The result of these processes was, except the meetings and activities themselves, the formulation of a series of good practices and policy proposals (Hellgren and Gabrielli, 2018<sup>16</sup>).

Second, within grounded theory there are different approaches, where some allow for the use of a predefined theoretical/conceptual framework to a greater extent than others (Glaser, 1998<sup>17</sup>). We relied mainly on Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) work, in which the sampling guides the researcher towards the construction of theory, and entered the field without a predefined theoretical framework. The sampling should ideally be theoretical, that is, the researchers choose the objects that are most relevant for developing the theory. This process is initially more explorative and becomes more clearly defined as the project progresses (Strauss and Corbin, 1990<sup>18</sup>). During our fieldwork, based on the analysis of our notes from the participant observations we performed during the workshops and dialogue meetings, we soon found patterns in the narratives of the Roma families that came to guide our subsequent interviews, data collection, coding and analysis by using

<sup>15</sup> McIntyre, A. (2008) *Participatory Action Research*. Sage

<sup>16</sup> Hellgren, Z. and Gabrielli, L. (2018) Promoting realistic expectations: Roma inclusion in the Catalan education system. GRITIM-UPF Policy Brief, no. 8, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Glaser, B. (1998). *Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussions*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

<sup>18</sup> Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990) *Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park: Sage.



the following key words: expectations; communication; representation; and discrimination. These are key concepts in the theoretical framework that is currently under construction.

#### 4.1. Sampling: recruiting our participants

This project is based on the voluntary participation of Roma families, school staff, and intermediary actors. As the project was initiated, the most central task was to recruit the participants in the target neighbourhoods: La Mina, Sant Roc, Bon Pastor and El Gornal. We choose to collaborate with our partner organizations in part because of their large contact networks and credibility among the Roma inhabitants in these neighbourhoods, and just as we had assumed, this social and cultural capital of theirs proved fundamental for the implementation of the project. Depending on the situations in each of the target neighbourhoods, they applied different methods in their practical, everyday work to approach the Roma families and schools, and achieve their commitment to the project. It is important to note the huge difference between accepting to participate, and to feel engaged and believe that the project will actually be able to make a difference. The partners emphasized their focus on the latter. Their function as key figures, well-known in the Roma communities in these neighbourhoods, would have made it easy for them to achieve people who would accept to participate out of loyalty. It was however not in their, or the project's, interest that the participants would become involved to do anyone a favour, but because they really wanted to. To accomplish this is a far more time consuming and demanding process: it requires frequent presence in the neighbourhoods on an everyday basis, engagement in the families' concerns, attending important events as weddings and funerals, discussing their concerns and achieving to, step by step, transmit why this project could actually be beneficial for them. The partners underline how central family events and responsibilities are to the Roma communities in general, and how this constitutes a major "cultural clash" with the majority society, which often places a larger weight on professional and educational responsibilities.

Moreover, in recruiting the participants, our partners needed to adapt to the routines and schedules of families and schools. There was no other option: participation in the project was completely voluntary, and the aim was to construct lasting channels of communication that would continue after the project's termination. This would be impossible if we were perceived as "pushy" or detached from the everyday concerns of the participants.



Regarding the contact with the schools, we had varying experiences. While particularly the three schools that came to participate closely throughout the project (El Til·ler (earlier Bernat de Boïl) in Bon Pastor, Institut-Escola de Sant Adrià in La Mina, and Escola Gornal) were very positive and open to the activities we implemented, and let us enter the schools and arrange some of the workshops in the school venues, other schools were reluctant to participate or even refused to do so. The reasons they gave us for this could be that they did not consider this kind of project useful, that they did not have the time, or –in one case– even that they did not consider it meaningful with such a project as the Roma pupils “would not continue studying anyway.” These experiences were challenging for the project implementation, but at the level of data collection and analysis, they represented important contributions. In the schools that did participate, attitudes were overall positive and supportive.

As we recruited our participants, we also discovered that intermediary actors (as the specific Roma mediators<sup>19</sup> that are present in many schools with large proportions of Roma pupils, or representatives of local Roma associations) played a central role. This kind of staff often functions as a valuable link between the children/families and the teachers, and many of them are themselves Roma (while from what we learned there are no Roma teachers in the target neighbourhoods, and hardly elsewhere in Catalonia either). After internal discussions at GRITIM-UPF, we decided to include also this kind of extra school staff with an intermediary position, and other social actors involved in the educational situation of the Roma families, to get additional perspectives.

## 4.2. Meetings, participant observations and in-depth interviews

The meetings that constitute the central part of the project’s empirical work were initially planned to be joint meetings between the Roma families and school teachers. This format was however quickly abandoned after one pilot meeting with school staff and Roma parents in the school Bernat de Boïl (this name was later changed to El Til·ler) in the Bon Pastor neighbourhood. Observing the meeting, we noticed that the noticeably hierarchical relation between the participating families and the school teachers would not constitute a viable format for fostering participation on equal terms, balanced and fluid exchanges and interactions, as well as a real appropriation of the project by the participants. Therefore, we reorganized the format and arranged the meetings and workshops separately with

<sup>19</sup> *Promotores escolares*, see: <http://ensenyament.gencat.cat/ca/arees-actuacio/centres-serveis-educatius/projectes-educatius/comunitat-educativa-entorn/promocio-escolar/>



families and school staff, respectively, in order to facilitate openhearted reflections on the Roma pupils' education-related expectations and experiences.

The participant observations were performed as the researchers from GRITIM-UPF attended the meetings that the partners organised in the target neighbourhoods, while keeping registers of the dialogues through written notes. We initially recorded some of these meetings, but it was very difficult to transcribe them given that many meeting participants would interrupt each other, speak at the same time, etc. It was therefore preferable to write down the dialogues instead. Parallel to the participant observations, we conducted in-depth interviews with participants in private, in a separate room. In total we conducted 87 interviews: 54 interviews with Roma mothers and fathers, 1 interview with a non-Roma father married to a Roma woman, 22 interviews with school staff, and 10 interviews with intermediary actors. We found that this number of interviews, complemented by the rest of the participants' experiences being registered during dialogue meetings, teacher training sessions and other meetings with school staff in the target neighbourhoods, was indeed sufficient to get a comprehensive view and develop an understanding of the families' life situations, and their and the school staffs' concerns.

We also engaged in dialogues with the participants throughout the project, in order to confirm that our interpretations matched their own perceptions. Particularly for the interviews, it was necessary to establish a previous relationship built on trust and respect. Vakeripen means conversation, and conversations take place at many other places besides the actual meetings and workshops: in everyday life in the neighbourhoods, during formal and informal meetings between the partner organizations, the families, local politicians, school staff, social agents as members of organizations, etc. As we evaluated the recruitment stage of the project, we also reflected upon our own role besides the research tasks. We concluded that our participation in the "conversation processes" that constituted the basis of the project was also important, not the least because making the university more accessible to Roma families was another central aim of the project. We therefore decided to participate actively in the workshops ourselves, and invite the Roma participants to visit the university.

## 5. Results of the research

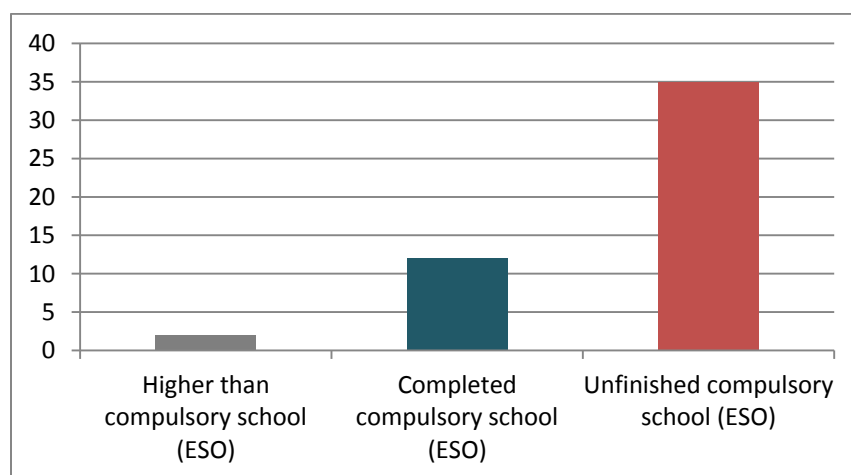
In this section, we present the results of our data collection and analysis, organized by the key topics that emerged from the fieldwork and interviews: *expectations*; *relationship/communication*; *representation*; and *discrimination*. We contrast the Roma mothers' and fathers' narratives with the school staff's and intermediary actors' accounts, in order to reflect and contextualize their different perspectives.

### 5.1. The respondents

#### 5.1.1. Profile of the interviewed Roma families

The Roma mothers and fathers who participated in our study have in common that they self-identify as “gitanas” and “gitanos” (see footnote 12 on page 14 about the use of the Spanish word for “gypsy”), and have one or more children in the schools of our four target neighbourhoods: La Mina, Sant Roc, Bon Pastor or El Gornal. There are differences between them concerning the educational level, with the main divide being between those who finished the compulsory education (primary and secondary school) and those who did not.

**Educational level among the interviewed Roma parents ( $n=49$ , source: own data)**







As seen in the figure, most of the interviewed Roma parents did not finish compulsory school (most of them left school between ages 12-14, generally to help their parents at the market place or with scrap sales), and only two of the interviewed Roma parents have studied beyond compulsory school (one has a high school diploma, *bachiller*, and one started studying social work at the university but could not continue as her scholarship ended and she could not pay for the fees). Regarding their professional situation, many are economically active though not in employment, referring both to formal and informal self-employment, most typically ambulating sales or sales in a market place. Several are unemployed and inactive, or only work occasionally. A small minority (two mothers and one father) have formal employment. These three respondents are among the small minority of seven out of fifty-four interviewed Roma parents who declare that they are doing fairly well economically and can cover their monthly expenses. The rest, forty-seven mothers and fathers, state that they have difficulties covering the basic costs of living, and thereby also their children's school fees (books and leaflets, excursions, extracurricular activities, etc.), which is an important element affecting the relationship between the family and the school.

As we analysed the results, we did not find any relationship between having finished or not compulsory school and having or not a job. We expected this to be relevant for whether the families would transmit to their children the expectation that completing the studies will improve their outlook on the labour market, but did not find that it was. All of the interviewed Roma parents consider education important for having a chance on the labour market. Nevertheless, it is essential to also talk about the obstacles for their educational expectations. Here, we found two factors to be particularly important: i) the parents' own negative experiences of discrimination on the labour market, and ii) the costs for higher education. The Roma families are well aware that today it is not enough to finish compulsory school at age 16 to be able to access a qualified job, but they are not sure that they are able to assume the economic effort that it means to pay for their children's continuing studies, in particular a university degree. It is important to bear in mind that the much-debated problem with early school abandonment is complex, and may reflect resignation before insuperable social and economic problems rather than lacking motivation or trust in the educational system, as is often assumed when referring to the Roma in Spain (Bereményi and Carrasco, 2015<sup>20</sup>).

<sup>20</sup> Bereményi, B.Á & Carrasco, S. (2015) Interrupted Aspirations: Research and Policy on Gitano Education in a Time of Recession in Spain. Intercultural Education Volume 26.1



### 5.1.2. School staff

The three schools that participated in the project more actively than the others could all be described as schools that in popular parlance are often referred to as “ghetto schools.” They have a high proportion of Roma pupils (oscillating between around 50% to over 90%), and the rest of the pupils are predominantly of immigrant origin. We interviewed male (9) and female (13) teachers, members of the directory boards, and support staff as psychologists and social workers who frequently interact with the Roma families, both from these schools and from some other schools in the target neighbourhoods. These other schools do not have such an explicit identity as “*gitano* schools” as the others, but they also have a significant amount of Roma pupils and share most of the other characteristics, being schools in socio-economically vulnerable areas where many of the pupils have special educational needs that the schools declare to have a hard time attending given their scarce resources.

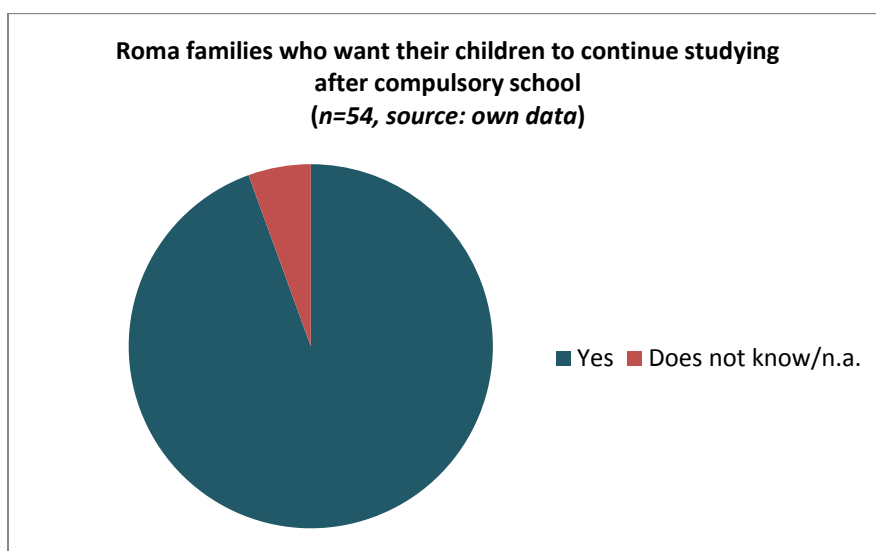
### 5.1.3. Intermediary actors

In addition to the families and the school staff, we interviewed ten intermediary actors who participated in the project. Most of them are young (aged between 20-35, except two who are in their 40s and 50s, respectively), and all of them function as mediators and links between the Roma communities and the schools in the target neighbourhoods. All except two of them are themselves Roma; six are women and four are men. Their professional roles are representatives of Roma associations (5), Roma mediators (4) and representatives of the local community centre (1). These intermediary actors filled an important function in our project, both to facilitate the communication between the schools and the families, and to interpret and transmit to us the dynamics in the neighbourhoods. Moreover, the intermediary actors who are themselves Roma fill an important function as role models for the Roma children, being examples of young Roma from disadvantaged backgrounds who have managed to complete their studies and influence on their environment.

## 5.2. Expectations and perceptions on opportunities

### 5.2.1. Roma families

In line with recent findings by Bereményi and Carrasco (2015<sup>21</sup>, 2017<sup>22</sup>), the Roma families who participated in our project overall have high expectations on the education of their children, seeing educational success as the only possibility to achieve more economic security and life quality than they have done themselves.



However, the families encounter important obstacles in their everyday lives, which sometimes make it difficult for them to support their children's schooling as much as they would like to, and they would like to receive more support from the schools. Many of the respondents describe that they want to help their children to study, but lack the necessary tools or resources to be able to do so. Several of the mothers and fathers barely know how to read and write and only have very basic educational skills themselves, and feel that they do not have enough knowledge to, for instance, help their children with the homework.

<sup>21</sup> Bereményi, B.Á & Carrasco, S. (2015) Interrupted Aspirations: Research and Policy on Gitano Education in a Time of Recession in Spain. Intercultural Education Volume 26.1

<sup>22</sup> Bereményi, B.Á & Carrasco, S. (2017) Bittersweet success. The impact of academic achievement among the Spanish Roma after a decade of Roma inclusion, in Second International Handbook of Urban Education. Springer. Eds. William T. Pink, George W. Noblit



I don't know any *gitanos* who don't care about their children's education. But it is a different thing whether they know how to help them or not. And the schools don't teach us how to do, for instance what we must do to make it to secondary school. The majority of the parents cannot help their children with this, they have no studies themselves. There is very little contact between the families and the teachers. *Roma father, 46 years old*

We are a few mothers who go and talk to the school, but they don't listen to us. Ok, so our children have problems with reading, with mathematics, but then help them! My son is 7 years old and he has not learned anything. What I want to do now is to change school. *Roma mother, 27 years old*

Besides the perception that they lack enough skills to be able to support their children, most of the Roma parents have to tackle what we came to define as “overwhelmed lives” during the course of the project, listening to their narratives. This refers to situations of economic precariousness, pressure, and preoccupation, together with constant fatigue related to long work hours, often in informal forms of sales with no income guarantee at the end of the day. Frequently the families also live many people in small apartments, with a lack of space and equipment (such as a PC) to perform the schoolwork adequately.

Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, the vast majority of the interviewed Roma parents want their children to continue studying as much as possible, and at the very least finish compulsory school (ESO). They consider their children's education as fundamental for them to have the opportunity of finding a good job, and believe that their own lives would have been better if they would have had the possibility to continue studying. The interviewed families are overall explicit with their desire that their children will “have a better life than them,” and to be able to choose what they want to do, something that they perceive that they were never able to do themselves. Moreover, several of them point out that education is the only way to change the disadvantaged situation of the Roma people in general, and to challenge what many of the respondents themselves describe as a self-destructive mentality of subordination and low achievement.

My son doesn't know anyone. I ask him, “are there no *gitano* teachers?” and he says “no mom, there are none.” And it would be fantastic if there were *gitano* teachers. But why aren't there any? Well that's what I am saying. Because the kids never wanted to finish school, they quit. And their parents did not care if they studied or not. That's why there are no *gitano* teachers. But a kid should not quit school at the age of 12, at 12 you must go to secondary school, then high school... and if you cannot manage more



after that, then you will find something else to do, but always something...  
something to fight for, not the street. *Roma mother, 37 years old*

When talking with the Roma parents about expectations, a central dimension was whether they perceived that their children's school expects less from them for being Roma, compared to the non-Roma pupils. Some of the interviewed parents state that they think so, and in all cases, these are families who have opted for taking their children to schools with a mainstream, non-Roma profile, with mostly families from the majority population.

It is the way they look at the kids...our kids, if a *gitano* kid does something they can't do it bothers them more than if the kid is not *gitano*, or they expect them to [cause trouble] just for being *gitanos*. They treat them differently. Maybe the other kids get to do multiplication and the *gitano* kids, addition. *Roma mother, 28 years old*

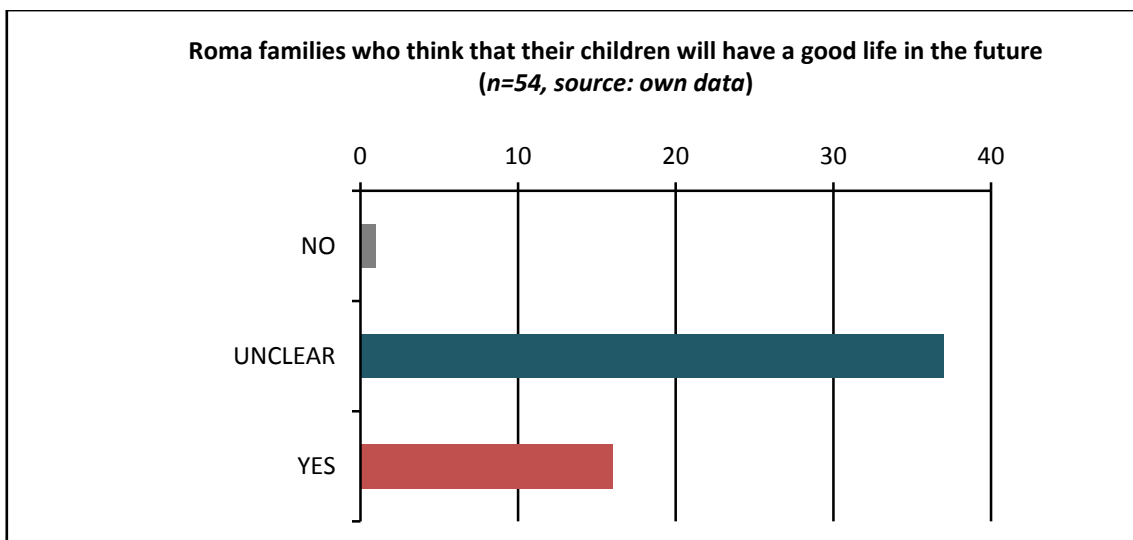
These cases are however few; most families think that the schools do generally not discriminate this way nowadays, though several of them experienced this during their own primary education, in most cases between ten and twenty years ago. In some of the more extreme cases, the mothers and fathers explain how they were discriminated by being constantly assigned other tasks, as colouring drawings while the other pupils were doing academic work. Others instead received much support from their teachers, but were obliged to abandon their studies due to the families' lack of resources and the demand on them to contribute to the family income, or, in the case of some of the mothers, because they got married early and had children. Among the mothers' and fathers' narratives there are many stories of having to leave school despite wanting to study, in order to help their parents in the market place or look after younger siblings. More urgent needs of supporting the family made their dreams of achieving a degree unrealistic. Several others instead did not wish to continue studying themselves, but state that it is important for them to support their children to do so, as "this is the only way to find a decent job these days," in a situation where traditional Roma professions as salespeople or iron collectors are becoming increasingly economically unsustainable.

After finishing ESO [compulsory school] I had to start working. And of course, studying... well, 15 years ago one needed money. To get a degree you have to go to the university and for that you need money. My dad worked with ambulating sales and needed me to help him... and well, if I can help my daughter to have a little more than I had, to have a better future than us, well, I want to make sure that she studies. *Roma father, 30 years old*



I work at the market, ambulating sales, and I would not want my son to suffer the fatigue that I do. I would like him to study and have a computer in front of him, and a table. That's what he says too, when he grows up he wants to sit in front of a computer, and I tell him that then he needs to study a lot. But for that to be possible we must also be able to pay for his degree. We will do all we can to make this possible but you never know. *Roma father, 32 years old*

When asked what they would want their children to work with in the future, the parents mention professions as engineer, teacher, social worker, pharmacist or chef, just to name a few.



When asked if they think that their children will achieve this, a majority are however uncertain. The obstacles are several; many worry about not being able to pay the costs for their children's higher studies, or that their children will suffer from the same discrimination when they look for jobs as they did themselves.

We [she and her husband, who do not himself know how to read] tell the school that we want our children to learn, write... but they don't do enough. We have to be able to help them and the school must do more. Now they have a school library and that makes me very happy. We want them to do things for the children so that they learn. My son is a bit behind and that scares me. Because I don't want him to have to spend all day in the street selling things. That is why I am so engaged in this, I'm after him all the time so that he learns to read, write, count... ok, if he ends up working in a supermarket or whatever, but at least I want it to be a real job. [...] I have been thrown out of all jobs I had when they found out that I was *gitana*. In



the last job they told me clearly one month ago, that they don't work with gypsies, and fired me. But now a *gitana* from here is at the university, it is important that the children see that. Because we don't want this [what they themselves have gone through] for our children. *Roma mother, 30 years old*

All the interviewed parents in the four neighbourhoods agree that they need to support their children to study to the extent this is possible. Some of them say that if their children do not want to study they have to oblige them, but most of the Roma parents think that they should not do that, emphasizing that they will support their sons and daughters but never try to force them. This view is related to the notion of autonomy that we found when we got to know these families during the course of the project. The parents overall give their children a comparably high degree of independence, which also means that the minors have to be responsible for and accept the consequences of their actions. Roma children may often have a greater degree of autonomy than children from the ethnic majority (which in part may be because of the precarious job situations of their parents, who spend long hours away from the home). This autonomy and the approach of “passive support” should not be misunderstood as a lack of interest in their children's choices, which could be the case.

### 5.2.2. School staff

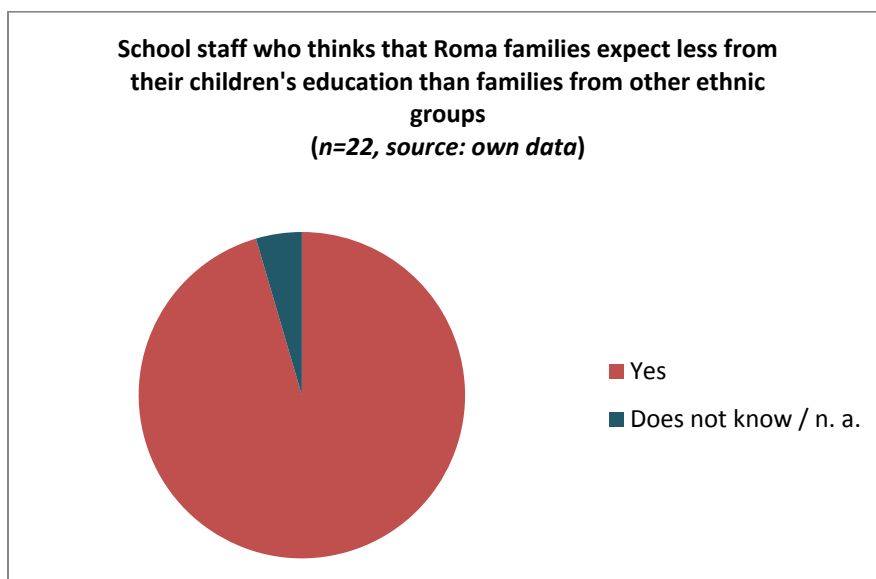
Among the interviewed teachers and other school personnel, as headmasters and social workers or psychologists, we found that most of them express low expectations on the educational outcomes of the Roma pupils, though some of the teachers try to find teaching methods that are more appealing to these children. A majority of the interviewed school staff (14/22) say that they try to encourage the Roma children to continue studying, though they overall find this very challenging, and more than half of them think that most of these children will fail in school, and that their future looks all but bright. There are also several more explicit examples of school staff who have apparently “given up,” and think that little can be done to improve the current situation. Overall we find much variation between schools, and also between different teachers within the same school, considering how they understand the Roma children's attitude towards education, and the underlying factors behind these attitudes.

We cannot [expect the same achievement from Roma children as other pupils in the school], that is impossible because they don't have the same habits, or the same family support. They come here because they must, not because they want to go to the university. And because they are happy here and feel well received in this school, but they are very disconnected at

the intellectual level. And we [the teachers] should be able to connect them. I try to, for instance when talking about Federico García Lorca... include flamenco, and when we play the flamenco boxes and sing the songs, I see how their faces sparkle. We can teach them to read through the music, the songs, we can find methods using things that they like... otherwise it is very difficult. *Primary school teacher 5, school with about 70% Roma pupils*

We should aspire at making them [the Roma children] function as citizens, at least. We cannot expect very much. IKEA here next doors is full of people with university degrees, or who work as babysitters... aspiring at our pupils reaching the university, that is neither realistic nor a guarantee of anything. How many *gitano* children from here continued to high school last year? Nobody. The families say that they cannot live from scrap sales or the market place anymore, but when it comes to it, they are not willing to do what it takes. *Member of school board 4, school with 50% Roma pupils*

The vast majority of the school staff that participated in the project thinks that the Roma families have low expectations on their children's education. This finding may be contrasted with the data in the previous section confirming that a vast majority of the interviewed Roma parents did express high expectations on the education of their children, though they often also expect these expectations to be hampered by several obstacles.



Many of the interviewed teachers and other school personnel consider the school segregation and “ghettoization” as the main problem at a general, structural



level. What they perceive as most detrimental for the situation of Roma children in the schools where they work, nevertheless, is the lack of family involvement and support, which they unanimously highlight as essential for educational success. Several of the teachers also complained about what they saw as the Roma parents not identifying with the school, and thereby not caring about their children's education. They claimed that they often feel frustrated because they perceive that the Roma families are not enough involved or interested in the education of their children, do not appear at meetings they are invited to, or may have aggressive and conflictive attitudes in their contacts with the school.

The families who want their children to study need to get them out of this neighbourhood. There may have been a Roma family here who made it... but in general, there is this culture of subsistence here, it is very difficult to get anywhere in a context like that. *Member of school board 3, school with about 50% Roma pupils*

The relationship with the parents could improve if they believed more in what we do here, and I think that we would need to mix the population more in order to achieve that. The children here need to see other children who learn and have ambitions, and if the families see that maybe three, four, or more children are moving somewhere, they would want their own children to do that too. The feeling that the kids here have is that they are left alone, and they don't seem to care. The school is too homogeneous, as is this neighbourhood. Have you had a walk around here? [...] It is terrible. This is a very marginal area. *Primary school teacher 8, school with about 95% Roma pupils*

The reasons behind these general attitudes, which perhaps best can be described as resignation, vary from underlining the socio-economic vulnerability of most of these families and all that entails, to instead claiming that Roma families lack interest in studies and are irresponsible. We also found that the school staff often tended to place much of the responsibility for the children's school success or failure on the families, rather than on the schools.

Everyone who finished this school and had a strong support at home get good grades in secondary school. It doesn't happen to a lot of children, but it happens. *School board member 5, school with about 70% Roma pupils*

I always tell them that they have the same opportunities as everyone else, but in their community they always prioritize their own things... the men have to do their business, the women take care of the home... and as they marry so early they abandon their studies. But I always try to make them reflect and transmit confidence, "why shouldn't you be that person who



studies, it could be you.” But then their family circumstances make them... they have to struggle, struggle, struggle, and finally they end up quitting.  
*Primary school teacher 2, school with about 70% Roma pupils*

Some of them however stated that they try their best to increase the Roma pupils’ and their families’ expectations for the future, and among several of the teachers there is awareness that the difficult circumstances that many of these families live in affect their future projects, regardless of their initial expectations, or dreams, and that they may need more support from the school system.

The teachers’ expectations... we always try. In theory, I think that we are aware that our expectations should be as high as possible, but I have to be self-critical, I cannot say that I am not affected by the environment here. I have been here for 9 years and have seen children who had enormous expectations, and then quit school at age 13. [...] Then there are also those who made it, but the other cases are the majority. There are many girls, especially, with great potential who end up pregnant at 13 or 14, and then their boyfriend leaves them at 16, and at 18 they come back to sign up their own children for school, and they don’t know what to do with their lives. And then I think that it is essential to be able to reincorporate them in the school system, but as teachers we often don’t know what possibilities they have, how they can enter the education system again. This is necessary, there should be someone in the school who can tell them “come here, sit down and let me tell you what your options are.” *Primary school teacher 10, school with 95% Roma pupils*

It is a pain in my heart [all the talented children who failed school]. I have spent so many years speaking with the families, telling them, look, your son or daughter could be a doctor, a lawyer... but in many cases they just say, “no, we are *gitanos*, we are not like you, we only need enough to get by every day, we don’t have to be lawyers or doctors.” It is like they think that, why should we fill their children’s heads with these stories, you know. And I don’t know what project could change this, I would just want to make the earth shake and tell them that “ok, you are *gitanos* but the world is yours too.” *Primary school teacher 11, school with 95% Roma pupils*

As we developed our contacts with particularly some of the schools participating in the project, which were more open towards us, we found that the school staff’s attitudes needed to be placed in a context of lacking resources in the public school system, aggravated by the cutbacks motivated by the financial crisis. The general perception in these schools was that the deficits in time and budget that they have to deal with on a daily basis made it virtually impossible to attend the needs of the pupils. For instance, the school being under pressure to charge the families for school material may induce the staff to practice “punishments”





when families do not pay on time, as denying children participation in excursions and school parties, which is an issue that generates much tension between the schools and the families. Moreover, several of the teachers claim that they constantly have to perform “social work” instead of actual teaching. For instance, some of the respondents claimed that there are many pupils in the schools where they work whose basic needs are not covered (some even come to class hungry, and there are teachers who explain that they themselves go and buy sandwiches during school hours), which means less time for teaching. This situation appears to seriously affect the learning processes in disadvantaged schools.

### 5.2.3. Intermediary actors

Turning to the intermediary actors we interviewed, they generally confirm that many families have high expectations towards the schooling of their children, and that this represents an important change in the Roma communities in recent years. In particular, those who maintain frequent contacts with the Roma pupils in their daily work recognize these rising expectations towards the school system.

I have heard more and more mothers who say: "I do not have studies, but I want my children to study." *Representative of Roma association 2*

However, structural factors linked to socio-economic conditions often seem to affect the translation of these expectations into reality.

The pupils themselves, from what I see, they are more motivated to continue studying every day, they want to become more involved in the education system and many more want to go to the university nowadays. But then there are these obstacles, which are mainly economical. *Representative of Roma association 1*

With the families, what I see is that there is an intention, but there are so many difficult circumstances, so many problems. Consider that we are usually large families, we do not have just one child and we are not only the father and the mother. If there is not the grandfather, or the grandmother, there is the older sister who is married, the nephews, perhaps there are even grandchildren in the home. And there is a day when they cannot eat, and there is a day when they cannot pay for water, and they are looking for how to pay the water. So, I want my son to study, but I have basic problems that are very important, sometimes more important than whether my son goes to the exam or not. *Representative of Roma association 2*



I mediate between schools and the *gitano* families, they talk to me if a *gitano* pupil for instance does not go to school. And then I go and talk to the family and try to... In one recent case for instance, the problem was the school material, they could not pay for the material that their son needed. Everyone in class had a laptop in the classroom except him, and then he felt bad, ashamed, and didn't want to go to school. And, mediating, we finally managed to solve it, the school understood and applied for money through the social services so that he could buy a laptop, and now he goes to school every day. *Representative of Roma association 5*

Several of them emphasize that increasing expectations from the families need to be recognized and supported by the schools and the teachers.

It is always said that the *gitano* families do not worry about education. The reality is quite different. Really the *gitano* families want their children to have training and studies that will help them, but at the expense of what? Many times, to be able to acquire this training, the families and the students are required to comply with different criteria, but they are not accompanied. I have some studies, and it was because of the accompaniment that my tutor did, together with my family. My family has always wanted me to study, always. But if I have come to study it has not been because my mother wanted to, but because of the accompaniment that I got from school. [...] In fact, in my work I find many parents who want an education for their children, but they do not get this support from the teachers, this accompaniment. *Roma school mediator 1*

Concerning expectations from the teachers, the intermediary actors consider that there is great variation, depending on the schools and on the engagement and the openness to diversity of single teachers.

Among the schools, there are many different cases. There are teachers who try to understand, and say "I am going to try to talk with this family, so that they understand that this girl has possibilities, and that it is good for her to try to study." Or "I'm trying to understand why this child comes tired to class, or why he is late." Then, there are other teachers who are stricter regarding the rules: "this child gets suspended, this child does not bring the material," and do not strive to look at what lies behind all this. *Representative of local community centre*

As for the teachers, they do have this intention, but sometimes they do not carry out their work in the most correct or optimal way possible. I mean, I can tell a family "your son is worth much," and convince them to support him to study, but at the same time the school may not understand cultural codes, they judge the child when sometimes he gets discouraged. *Representative of Roma association 1*



If I ever felt supported, it has been by teachers who have seen first-hand what the behaviour was and what the attitude was. From educational centres there was nothing. Zero. For classmates, I can tell you the same. For directors, the same. [...] Teachers, tutors, who saw your behaviour, your effort. They saw the family effort, despite of where they came from, but it was mostly people who saw you first-hand. From the school as an institution, nothing at all. *Representative of local community centre*

Moreover, several of the intermediary actors of Roma origin have themselves experienced prejudice against them from school staff, and this is something that they try to address in their work in order to make teachers try to see the potential of these children.

It was clear that I came with a question mark from the beginning. I had to show that it was possible, it was always the same comment: "if he continues like this..." A question mark towards the future. About others [they just said] "that is very good student." But when they talked about me "if he continues like this, maybe he can reach..." We are always questioned. *Representative of local community centre*

There is this framework that is given to the student, of being *gitano*, and then the accompaniment is not done with the same intensity. It is a minimal accompaniment, by obligation, it is often thought that this student will end up not studying anyway, working with his family, so the accompaniment is less intense. It is the Pygmalion effect, all the expectations that you have on the student, is what he will receive and will have himself. *Roma school mediator 1*

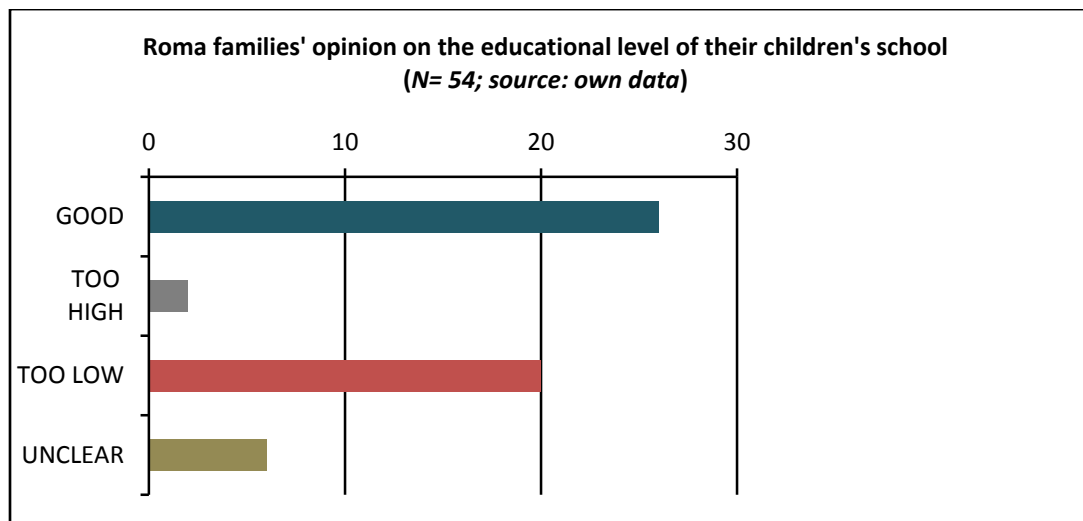
## 5.3. The relationship between the Roma families and the schools

### 5.3.1. Roma families

The majority of the interviewed mothers and fathers (32 out of 54) are overall satisfied with their children's school and say that they have a good relationship with the teachers (although in most cases this relationship is limited to a brief greeting when picking up the child as school ends, and attending a couple of meetings per year, which could be considered a general school-family contact pattern in Catalan schools and not specific for the Roma community). The rest are either not satisfied (seven out of 54), or have no clear opinion on this and think that the school is acceptable (15 out of 24). When asked what they consider most important with the school, the vast majority of the families state that it is that their

son or daughter is happy there. There are however a couple of issues that most of them underline as central, and that are a source of concern for many of the families.

First, many families consider the educational level of the school that their children attend as “too low,” and they are concerned about their children not reaching the level of knowledge and skills necessary in primary school to be able to continue to secondary school (which reflects a reason for early school leaving that needs to be further investigated).



The families who worry about the school level being too low think that the teachers tend to generalize and not see the specific needs and abilities of each pupil, or to accept a much lower achievement than they should. Several of them also express the perception that the teachers don't intervene when there, for instance, is a conflict between children, but prefer to look the other way. The families overall reclaim more active involvement and higher demands on the children from the teachers.

I only ask for my son to get the support he needs, because he really is behind. I don't understand Catalan and can't help him with that, and I cannot do the multiplication either. And my husband cannot read... but [we are members of the parents' association, AMPA], we are very engaged in the school because we want our children to be more than ourselves. I'm not saying that my son should be a lawyer, but... I want him to be whatever he wants to be. And I am worried, because I don't want him to have to sell things in the streets all day. That is why I am so concerned that he learns to read, write, count... I don't make him change school only because in the



other school the level is very high and they would just laugh at him. *Roma mother, 30 years old*

There is a need for... more authority, let's say, when the children misbehave... there are lots of children in the school that perhaps have been raised differently [than his daughter, who is afraid of some other children in the school], they leave school alone and walk around in the streets. No parents would like other kids to hit their child, but... they are raised differently, what can we do. But the teachers should control them a bit and make an effort for them to learn more. *Roma father, 30 years old*

The usual option for several of the families who are worried that their children will not be able to successfully complete their studies if they continue in the “ghetto school” is to try changing to a school with predominantly non-Roma pupils, where the academic level is considered to be higher. Some of the few families with a comparably higher income also opt for paying the fee in a semi-private (*concertada*) school, as they think that this is the best strategy to improve their children’s future opportunities. However, the Roma children who enter such a “mainstream school” (which may be public or semi-private) may be confronted with prejudice mainly from the other families, though in some cases also from the teachers. In fact, the only cases of explicit experiences from discrimination by school staff that the families told us about took place in schools where the Roma pupils only were a small minority. This finding implies that parents of particularly the more high-achieving and motivated Roma pupils may have to choose between a school that is assumed to foster better academic results but where the child feels less comfortable, and a school where the learning processes are hampered by insufficient resources, but where the young Roma feel welcome and allowed to “be who they are.”

I am very pleased with the school, the teachers are fantastic and the children are happy there. But I am worried that the level is too low. I am worried for my son, who is 10 years old, he has the capacity to achieve much more but I can see that they are not taking advantage of his potential. He loves to learn, he is curious, but I can see that they don't stimulate him enough, the learning level is very poor [compared to other public schools]. If there is something that we can do, please let us know, it is a matter of my son's future and I would do anything it takes. But if they don't tell me anything, there is nothing I can do. *Roma mother, 32 years old.*

It [a semi-private school] costs over 90 euros per month plus the material, and the clothes, the school's gym wear... In a school like this you have to pay for everything. But [it is worth it] because here he will learn something. My siblings' children go to a public school, they are big but they know





nothing, because they have to adapt to the slower children. My son is 3 years old and he already speaks English. It is a big effort for us but you have to pay for the advantage. *Roma mother, 23 years old*

This dilemma is strongly felt in relation to a reform that was the objective of intense debate as we conducted our study: that of whether the primary schools (for ages 6-12) with high levels of Roma pupils should be expanded to incorporate also the secondary school level (for ages 12-16), in order to cover the whole cycle of obligatory education. At present, in many cases the pupils have to change school in the transition from primary to secondary school. For many Roma children and their families, changing to a school where the Roma pupils represent a minority may be overwhelming, and they end up leaving school, rather than attending a school where they feel uncomfortable and unprepared to keep up with the academic level. Many of the families and Roma representatives organized and advocated for this reform, and for instance, the Gornal school was transformed to include both primary and secondary school (*institut-escola*) during our presence there. The defenders of this model argue that it is a way to prevent school abandonment, while its critics argue that it perpetuates segregation and a lower education level among Roma pupils if they “stay in the ghetto school.” The different opinions and experiences among the families reflected both views.

Those who take their children to other schools after primary, they will see that... Here [in the local, public school with high rates of Roma children and reputation as low achieving] they understand our children. Here they feel well treated, and maybe in another school they would not, because there they don't know how to act with kids like ours. So then it is better that they go to secondary school here, all of them together and relaxed, they already know each other. Here they can feel at ease studying. Maybe the level is lower, I'm not saying it isn't. But well, it is also important how people treat each other, right. Here there are *gitanos*, *payos* [*non-Roma*], *moros*, Chinese... and everyone gets along well. We are all equal here and the children feel that, and maybe in another school they don't. *Roma mother, 27 years old.*

Secondly, several of the families are concerned about a practice that is applied in many schools, and that they perceive as a form of punishment that consists of excluding or humiliating their children when they are unable to pay the school fees and material used in the classroom on time. Many of the families declare that the pressure to pay for the school fees, and the risk that their children will suffer if they do not pay, causes them much stress and tension.



Paying for the books is a problem. If you cannot pay they will take away the material from the children and they cannot follow the course, they don't have the same things as the rest. The headmaster gives us many notices and asks us to pay because they don't want to do this to the kids, but sometimes it is difficult, sometimes it is not possible to pay. We usually manage because we talk to them [the school staff] and explain when we are having a hard time, and we always pay when we are able to, but there are others who just cannot pay. *Roma mother, 30 years old*

I would like to find out if anything can be done about the payments for the material, because it is impossible to pay that much. In my son's school I pay it a little at a time...if they ask for 20 euro, how could I pay for that all at once? Sometimes they even ask for 100 euros. Or if they are going on an excursion, perhaps you have to pay 10 or 15 euros or otherwise he cannot go. The teacher told him "you cannot come," they were going to a water park and my son had to stay in school, in another class. They tell the kids "tell your mother that she has to pay or otherwise you cannot come on the excursion". And the kids come crying and saying "mom, you owe the school money and they won't let me join the excursion." *Roma mother, 31 years old*

Besides the forms of punishment referred to in the quotes above, there are other examples from the families' narratives, as giving the children different coloured cards that they have to show their class mates (for instance yellow for ok; red for not having paid), or being denied access to the school's summer party. This form of differential treatment of the children, depending on whether their parents have paid for the fees or not, generates feelings of shame and humiliation in the affected children, who compare themselves with their class mates and may even be mocked by these. We found that such experiences of practices that are perceived as highly discriminatory damaged the affected families' relationship with and trust in the school.

### 5.3.2. School staff

When asking the school staff about their relationship with the Roma families in the school where they work, most of them (13 out of 22) considered that the relationship is overall positive, and the rest that it is more or less positive. Most of the school staff however stated that they would want more active participation and involvement from the Roma families. Nobody claimed to have a negative personal relationship with the Roma families, though 13 out of the 22 interviewed teachers and other school staff declared that the overall relationship between the school and the Roma families is conflictive. Comparing in details the school staff's different



narratives on their and their school's relationship with the Roma families, we also found great variation both between schools, and between teachers within the same school, indicating that the pupils may encounter very different attitudes, expectations, work methods and support depending on what teacher they are assigned.

The main problem is that the [Roma] parents don't get involved. They don't consider the school as important as they should do, and then what happens? Well if the children don't feel like going to school, they don't. If they don't do the homework, nobody cares. They don't consider the school important because... well, a bit because they think that it is for the *payos*. From my point of view, that is the main problem. If the parents would consider school important... but they have very low expectations for their children. I have worked here many years and I see that what the parents want, parents who used to be my pupils, is that their kids can drive a truck and become scrap dealers. That is the highest expectation they have.  
*Primary school teacher 17, school with about 70% Roma pupils*

This is the first *gitano* school where I have worked and it has been a tough learning process, but I am very pleased. This is a different world, you either like it or you don't... [...] At first we collided a lot, I felt frustrated, I felt that hey, I am the teacher, the adult, and I should have the last word, but they [the Roma children] always answer back. They are very *gitano* right, they speak back... but after my first term here I learned how to speak to these children, and how to make them listen to me.

**Question: Do you have any advice to give to other teachers, on how to reach these children?**

Yes, well this is probably very politically incorrect, but to touch them a lot, place your hands on their chest, to make their heart relax if they are very tense. Speak calmly to them, look them in the eyes and make them look back, because they tend to not look at you. I have children of my own, and well, it is about treating them as if they were your own children. At some point these children cease being only pupils, they become something more. In a class that lasts one hour, perhaps we spend forty minutes solving conflicts... and when I get home and start preparing the next class I think... well I think a lot about how to fill the class with content. [...] They understand that they must study, but they can still not see exactly what it will lead to. My daughter is 14 and she sees that all the adults in her environment have jobs, we went to the university and then we got jobs. And for a *gitano*... they have not seen these references, that somebody achieved something through studies. So at 14 they leave school, because



they are not convinced that they will achieve anything through education.  
*Primary school teacher 3, school with about 70% Roma pupils*

In order to reconnect with the two issues in the schools that concerned the families the most, the academic level and the practice of punishments for non-payment of school fees, respectively, the rest of this section will focus on these topics. First, regarding the academic level, we found that half of the interviewed school staff considered the level at the school where they work as lower than average.

What I would expect from a normal kid... or normal, I mean, I don't want to say that these [Roma] kids are not normal, but well, they are affected by a series of circumstances that makes it [difficult]... if you can ask for a lot more from another kid, maybe from these kids you cannot because perhaps they fall asleep in the middle of the class, because they have not slept at home. Some of them even have no stable homes and sleep on the sofas of relatives or so. *Primary school teacher 12, school with about 50% Roma pupils*

In general, we found that the school staff we interviewed were much aware of the economic difficulties that many of the Roma families have to deal with, but also that their own situations of lacking resources—aggravated by a decade of cuts in public spending after the financial crisis—contributed to a rather chaotic situation in many schools with high proportions of pupils with special needs.

The educational level of these [Roma] children is much lower than others and it is dramatic that they cannot read... they don't know lots of things that they should know [when they end primary school]. I have had pupils in sixth grade who practically cannot read at all and that is very dramatic. [...] I often feel that these children live in two very different worlds, in school and outside... I am not saying that the families don't care but... I am not saying that they do not consider education important, but they have so many problems, so many things that they consider more important. *Primary school teacher 18, school with around 70% Roma pupils*

Altogether, the socially alarming situation in these neighbourhoods makes it according to the teachers hard for them to focus on the academic content. Several of the interviewed teachers also state that the high levels of absenteeism and unstructured family situations among particularly the Roma pupils make it very difficult for them to follow the course plan.

Absenteeism is a huge problem here and the truth is that it is mostly among *gitano* kids. I don't like to generalize, each family is different, but it's also true that I often call them to say how important it is that their child goes to



school but some even say “I don’t care”... It is difficult, these are families who live for the day, they go to the market to sell things and have a meal on the table by the night, or some walk around here begging for money... and then the school is just somewhere to leave the child meanwhile. I find pupils that I attend alone in the streets and they are in primary school, some even in pre-school [ages 3 to 6], can you imagine that. And I find it problematic in this school that we tend to blame the children for showing up late or not at all... But it is a problem for the teachers, they are talking in class and after five minutes, one child shows up, then after another five, other children... And myself, I only have 5 hours per week to attend these children and their families. And what can I do in 5 hours... *Social worker, school with about 50% Roma pupils*

Second, as described above in the section about the Roma parents’ perceptions on their relationship with the school, the issue of non-payment or late payment of the school fees (for instance for excursions) and material was salient in the interviews. Also when talking to the teachers, it becomes clear that this is a central, and highly contentious, topic in most of the schools. Mainly, there is a dividing line between the school staff who thinks that the families who do not pay on time do not value their children’s education enough, and those who believe that this is due to these families’ precarious situation.

There are so much polemics over something that I think is really a symbolic amount of money. Somehow you have to make them [the Roma] feel that it is their school and you can only achieve that by making them pay, that is the only way they will respect the material, by making them cover this symbolic expense. *Primary school teacher 19, school with about 50% Roma pupils*

We do it [apply punishments for non-payment of school material] because otherwise nobody would pay for it. In secondary school they hardly have to pay for anything here, there are computers in the classrooms, or well, they have to buy one book or two. But we know which families don’t pay because they don’t want to, and which families really cannot pay, and in those cases we would never punish the child. And it is not exactly a fortune, maybe 50 euros [per child and school year] that they pay in quotas. It is important that we are demanding, we don’t want to contribute to this.... many of these children are living in a bubble of social welfare and we want to teach them to be responsible. Always having to depend on assistance affects their expectations for the future, which are already very low. *School board member 2, school with predominantly Roma pupils*

They really have difficulties paying and we only charge 30 euros for school material in a year, in many schools they charge 100 or more. We do what we can to avoid that the cost is too big for the families, but yet it is hard for





them. Some families have 5 or 6 children, then it is more expensive of course, 30 euros per child. We try to help them, let them pay little by little... but finally, they only pay when their children insist, the children don't want to be different, they want to have their books as everyone else in the classroom. *Primary school teacher 16, school with about 70% Roma pupils*

Several of the teachers and other school staff also describe how many families' economy has gotten worse over the later years, affected by the crisis, and the simultaneous cuts in public spending have caused a situation in which many families (both Roma and immigrant families) who would need subsidies, for instance to pay for the school meals, are denied these. In some schools, this leads to situations where children have a hard time focusing on the learning as they have not eaten enough, and there are teachers who describe how they have to buy food for hungry children during the break, or school boards that look the other way and let the children eat the school meals even if their families have not paid the fee.

There are many families who need help... 81% of the families in this school get subsidies for the meal. And the rest... [would need help but have not had it granted, or do not know how to apply for the subsidies]... we try to help them. Sometimes we give the children the meal anyway. We have a problem now with a [Roma] family who has seven children, they live as squatters and only have half of the cost for the meals covered by the social services. But 4 of their children are pupils in this school and come here every day, and then we pay the rest of the cost, because they have no resources, the parents walk around looking for metal to sell. *Member of school board 6, school with around 70% Roma pupils*

All in all, as this section reflects, the relationship between the Roma families and the schools is a highly complex issue that is affected by a wide range of factors influencing on their personal and professional situations, not the least the majority of the families' precarious life situations, and the schools' difficulties to manage their limited resources. What we find overall is a need for more (egalitarian) communication and mutual understanding, to overcome misunderstandings and conflicts that may well be related to both parties (families and school staff) feeling overwhelmed by their daily realities.



### 5.3.3. Intermediary actors

The point of view of the intermediary actors is perhaps particularly central concerning the relationship between the Roma families and the schools, as they often work specifically to strengthen this relation, and have a first-hand perception of the issues at stake. The intermediary actors for instance emphasize the importance of building a social bond with the families in order to establish mutual trust.

They know that they can count on us for whatever. A mother came here one day saying “this happens to me ... we went to the town hall where the letter of payment came from, or the scholarship, and I did not understand [what I was supposed to do].” And if we have to go there one morning and be with her several hours, we do. Our work is about taking care of these very human things, that maybe in the school, for a matter of time, or because of the regulations, they cannot do the same way we can. The social part is the one that I think influences so much, it does so much good.

*Representative of Roma association 2*

The recognition by the teachers of the efforts made by Roma families also seems relevant in order to establish a good communication with the families.

Teachers do not always take into account the efforts of the *gitano* families, not all of them, but teachers are not aware of the situation of the *gitano* families, and as they are not conscious they do not take this effort into account. And from this lack of communication, of relationship, a rejection originates. I think that more relationship is needed, to try to have a little more awareness, get to know the *gitano* families a little bit better, open the doors of the school to the families, try in every way possible to understand the effort that a *gitano* family makes. If not, the trust will be broken.

*Representative of Roma association 3*

Moreover, several of the intermediary actors point out that it is central for the relationship with the families that the schools have knowledge about the families and the neighbourhood they live in, and show understanding of their culture and customs.

A mother commented it many times, she valued very much that the boy at the reception desk, the secretary, the director, the teachers, and the dining room instructors were people who had been in the neighbourhood for many years, and who knew the situation there very well. Many times they [the school staff] struggle to understand the codes of the neighbourhood, to not be so rigid with the time of entry in school, for example. All these things that can seem very scandalous, depending on the school, in this school it is



really understood that it is important to take good care of a family, perhaps to agree on these things, which really are not so important. This is valued very much by the families. And in fact it is key to bring the school closer to the neighbourhood environment. *Representative of Roma association 4*

It is necessary that someone tells us “you know that we value you, you know that we believe in you, you know that we think of you. [...]” This is what creates confidence, showing trust makes us feel closer. And I think that always in the school, families have been distanced, and someone has to break this, and this someone has to be the [school] administration itself. It has to be like a declaration of intentions that what has happened until now [referring to discrimination and exclusion of the Roma in education], or until 10 or 30 years ago, for which no one has been held responsible, tells us that at least they recognize that this will to be like that again”. *Representative of local community centre*

Both among some of the participating Roma families, the schools, and the intermediary actors, there are experiences of conflicts, which often originate in misunderstandings. The interviewed intermediary actors with a mediating function point at the risk that when a school has a bad experience in the relation with a Roma family, this seriously hampers the school’s and the teachers’ perception about the possibility of a good relationship in the future. The school may also come to generalize and view all the Roma families as problematic, rather than seeing them as individual cases.

There is a lack of knowledge. They [the teachers] judge the family at a particular moment of conflict, and then they determine whether there is going to be a good relationship or not. *Roma school mediator 1*

The possibility of the families to participate in the school, through already existing fora as parents’ associations, or through new ones, is also important, according to the intermediary actors.

Let’s see, in the school here, they have very, very good intentions... but they do not really let us in, to participate. They can ask us what we think, but they are the ones who rule. *Representative of Roma association 6*

Finally, the intermediary actors point out that the high turnover rates among the teachers, particularly in schools with a high share of Roma pupils, represents another important barrier to a fluid and constructive relationship between schools and families.



The issue of stability is essential, I think. And also, as a mother as I am myself, I have my daughter in school here. If during a course they change her teacher three or five times, there will be times when I get tired, and there will be times when I do not trust the school. *Representative of Roma association 2*

It's as if you had a dentist, and the dentist is changing all the time ... it's clear that you lose your trust. The issue of rotating the teachers in schools so much, I see it as something inconvenient for all families, *gitanos* or not. The relationship grows with time together, that is what makes a good relationship develop. *Representative of Roma association 4*

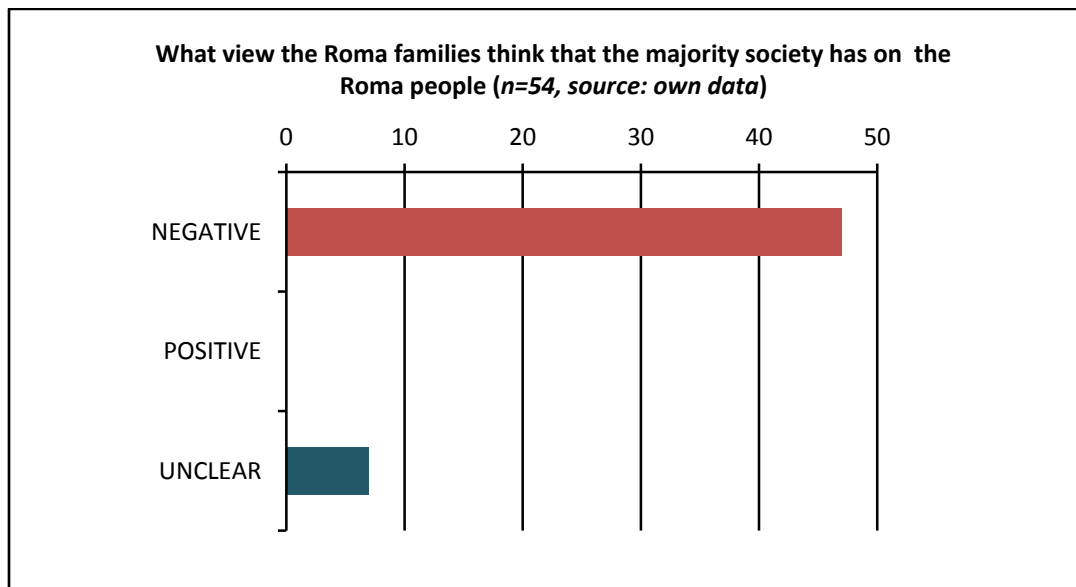
There is a lot of changing school staff, and many times the teachers do not want to be in this neighbourhood. This is transmitted to the children. The teachers have to be motivated, but first comes a substitute, the substitute does not want to be there either, and then many signals of racism come, because the teacher does not understand the culture, he does not want to be there. Finally, he or she is going to take the sick leave and another substitute will come who maybe is in the same situation, and does not want to be there either, and does not know the cultural codes. *Representative of Roma association 2*

## 5.4. Representation and perceptions of Roma culture

### 5.4.1. Roma families

To perceive that your ethnicity and culture is respected and valued in the society where you live appears essential for any person, and even more so for a child who is developing his or her self-esteem and self-image. Nevertheless, being Roma, similarly to what it means to belong to other minority groups that typically do not have a high social status in society, often implies having to deal with a set of prejudices in their relation to the ethnic majority on a daily basis. Taking this understanding into account, we wanted to ask the respondents about what it means for them to be “gitano,” and what image of the Roma culture they perceive that the ethnic majority society (in Spain and Catalonia referred to as “paya”) has. Asking these questions, throughout the interviews, two contradictory narratives emerged: on the one hand, the pride of “their way of being” and the strong identification with Roma culture that the respondents themselves perceive, and on the other hand, the strongly negative perception on Roma culture that they

perceive in their relations with the majority society: in supermarkets, in public spaces, in the mass media, in workplaces, and at several times also in the schools.



We also found that many of the respondents make clear distinctions between the *gitano* “way of being” and the majority society, the *payos*, while others emphasize that we are essentially all the same. Here follow a few quotes among many that illustrate these sentiments:

They think that we are thieves, swindlers... People have an image of us that is not true. For me, being *gitano* means knowing how to adapt to any environment, survive, help others... if someone is cold, we'll give him or her a blanket. We actually have a bigger heart than many *payos*.” *Roma father, 35 years old*

Sure, we are very expressive, and if a *gitano* just makes an effort to study he can get anywhere he wants to, we are nice in every way, friendly, we love people... If I see someone crying in the street I ask how I can help, the *payos* don't do that. And I want my daughter to be proud of who she is, to say out loud that she is *gitana* and she wants to keep her way of being. *Roma mother, 24 years old*

Generally, they [*payos*] look at us in a very bad manner, I don't know if it is because they are afraid of us. We have always lived here together with them but always... if two kids get into a fight and one is *gitano*, that one is always considered the one to blame. *Roma mother, 40 years old*





Moreover, the respondents overall talk about the great diversity *within* the “Roma community.” Many of the mothers and fathers speak of the different Roma identities in the different neighbourhoods, for instance the differences between the Roma communities in La Mina compared to Sant Roc. Several of them furthermore recognize that there are plenty of differences also within the same neighbourhood, and that, though there are common characteristics that make Roma across the world to some degree identify with each other, “each family has its own way of being *gitano*.”

You know...I am *gitana* and that other woman is also *gitana*, but maybe she does things in one way in her home and I do them another way. The *gitanos* don't all have the same costumes or ways of thinking; we are also individuals. But people think that for being *gitanos* we all do things in the same way and that is not so. *Roma mother, 30 years old*

Another central dimension of what it means to be Roma today, which is much debated both within the Roma communities and in the schools, is related to the role of women and girls. While there are Roma defending their traditional practices, ever more Roma voices speak out against premature emancipation and early marriages, affecting particularly Roma girls who still in several cases abandon their studies before completing compulsory school in order to get married and raise children. This topic emerged both during our meetings and interviews with the Roma families. Among the interviewed mothers and fathers, the most common point of view was that if their daughters want to marry early, this will be their own decision, and they will respect that. Many of the mothers we interviewed married very young themselves, and overall they do not think that this was a good decision. However, it was their own decision in all cases; none of the respondents claim to have been forced or pressed to marry by her family.

The truth is that I don't want her [my daughter] to marry. But we, we didn't marry young because our parents wanted us to, people mix us up with peoples whose parents do decide this. We are the ones who want to marry. Our parents don't want us to marry that young... when I told my mom that I was getting married at age 17, she threw an iron at me [laughs]. But the thing is that when we want to have a boyfriend, we get married. And I want my daughter to study instead. *Roma mother, 44 years old*

Me and my husband agree that our daughter should go to secondary school. What would she do at home? Do like the *gitanos* used to and get married already... no, no, everything at a time. Now is not an age for her to get married. I married at 24, my sister at 30. *Roma mother, 40 years old*



Moreover, when we talked with the Roma respondents about their cultural identity we found that many of them expressed much self-criticism and a negative self-image parallel to their pride of the Roma culture, which appeared rather contradictory. Their narratives emphasized what they considered a problem with resignation, passiveness and overall low expectations and conformism among the Roma communities. Implicit in several of these stories was the need for the Roma people to self-organize and become more active in order to change the persisting situation of exclusion and subordination that affects most of them.

We conform with very little. We are such conformists. As soon as we have enough to eat... a *gitano* does not ask for more. *Roma mother, 24 years old*

A related and recurrent topic is that of the families' relationship with the social services, from which many of them receive welfare subsidies. Many are frustrated about not having a stable job and being forced to ask for social welfare, a situation that is often perceived as humiliating. Moreover, several of the respondents claim that there are tensions in their neighbourhoods between the Roma communities and more recently established immigrant communities, who often perceive that they compete over resources as social aid and free school meals for children.

Another issue that was relevant for several of the Roma respondents was the media image of the Roma people, which could be situated within a broader historical construction of the "gitano" surrounded by stereotypes and prejudice. Several of the interviewed mothers and fathers complained about how their people are portrayed in mainstream media, for instance through the popular Spanish TV show "The Gypsy Kings." In relation to the representation (or misrepresentation) of the Roma people by the mainstream society, we talked much with the participating families about what role the school system could play to promote a more positive, mainstreamed and nuanced view.

As far as I know, [the schools] never teach that... the *gitano* people, our history. And that is something they ought to do. Just as they teach about the holocaust, the suffering of the Jews, they should teach what the Nazis did to the *gitanos*, because the *gitanos* suffered too. And not only Hitler, the Catholic kings also made our people suffer. There are *gitanos* all over the world, but Spain is the only country where we don't speak our language, because here they took our identity from us. And we have been here for hundreds of years, it is not as if we weren't here to stay. *Roma father, 34 years old*



All in all, the families' reflections on what it means to be Roma transmit a frail balance, or perhaps imbalance, between pride and a strong sense of identification on the one hand, and on the other hand, sentiments of inferiority caused by the interiorisation of stereotypes from the majority society.

#### 5.4.2. School staff

The interviewed school staff's reflections on Roma culture and what role it plays in school were much related to the question of how to understand the particularly alarming school situation of Roma children, compared to children from other ethnic groups. Again, we found great variations between the teachers, who tended to either view the reasons behind the problems as related to the cultural specificities of the Roma people, or as related to their socio-economic marginalization and not their culture or traditions.

Among the *gitanos* there are no parents who think that their children could finish secondary school and continue to high school. To them, it is enough that they learn to read and write and count a few numbers. That is all they need to get a driver's license and go look for metal to sell. *Primary school teacher 17, school with about 70% Roma pupils*

The families have... they have a family model that is specific for the *gitano* ethnicity. So when you ask them what they want to do, they may say "go and look for scrap as my father." They don't have an educational model. [...] It is true that they have economic problems, but other ethnic groups have that too. It is more about the [Roma] families' expectations. But there are small changes in each generation. Many of the parents cannot read, but their children come to school and learn how to read, these are very important changes that we need to value. *Primary school teacher 16, school with about 70% Roma pupils*

Many of them [the Roma families] have a life situation that... Look, the children are not problematic for being *gitanos*, but because they live in families without a stable home, their situation is difficult... and they come here to unburden. We are like containers, we need to contain these children's feelings and try to manage them. And then, many times [our work in school] is more about basic habits than actual learning. We have to solve many conflicts; these children feel bad in their everyday life because they have many problems at home. *Social worker, school with about 50% Roma pupils*

They [the Roma children] are more different than other groups, so they need more resources. If you want to integrate a cultural group that does not



feel part of society, it is necessary that they go to school, that they have a project for the future... so if we really want to integrate them, I think that we must invest more resources. And it seems unfair that they give so little resources to the schools, they have to do what they can and finally they end up blaming the *gitano* ethnicity, and the *gitanos* feel accused, and this generates a dual rejection, if you understand. It is as if they give half a bread to each child, but some children need a whole bread because they are weaker. But the problem is that there is not enough bread. It is very important to try to make the *gitano* kids have a better future, but that is only possible if they invest more resources. So saying that “there are few resources and these children should behave like this or that,” it doesn’t work, these children are *gitanos* and obviously they need more resources.  
*Member of school board 1, school with about 70% Roma pupils*

Another central concern among the school staff is the perception that many of them have of “having to educate the families,” arguing that the Roma families largely lack the habit of socializing their children the same way families from other ethnicities are expected to do. Several of the interviewed teachers think that the Roma children lack any forms of constructive stimuli in their homes, and that this explains part of why they lag behind in school. They also consider it problematic that Roma children often do not enrol in day-care from ages 0-3.

It is a cultural collision, regardless of how you look at it. Here [at school] we meet children who start school [at age 3] without having learned certain habits, they may still wear diapers... and it is a challenge for us to work with. [...] And then the matter of what stimuli these children may receive in their homes... they may never read any stories. And it is not just about resources, maybe they have iPads and computers but they do not know how to use them properly, there is no control of how the children use these tools. *Member of school board 5, school with about 70% Roma pupils*

I am really sorry to say this, but I think that many of these [Roma] families are very overwhelmed by many other issues and the school... sure they want their children to do well and learn things, but they have many children and many problems, and perhaps at home they don’t have this motivation and stimulation... to get a book and read it, or just talk and listen... I don’t know, maybe they don’t even look at the works their children do in school, or if we give them homework, they don’t sit down with the children to do the homework. I often feel that these children live in two different worlds, what we give them here in school, and another very different world outside. The parents are overwhelmed and trust us, they leave their children here and don’t care about what we do. I have the feeling that they [the Roma children] lack any stimulation outside of school. *Primary school teacher 18, school with about 70% Roma pupils*



I think so [that it is about culture]. They are very demotivated... they come here without their backpacks, children in sixth grade... and things as punctuality, order, hygiene... it depends much on their parents. Because if their parents don't wake up until 8.30, the children will arrive late to school. This is a difficult task. We work much with respect, habits, coexistence, to sit properly on the chair, listen to others... it is mainly about basic education. And then, when we can, we focus a little on the contents, methodology and so, but with this kind of pupils, school is mainly about basic education. Because later, unfortunately, we know that very few of them will finish secondary school, go to high school or to the university... but at least they must learn to behave like people, respect others, know when they must be silent and so on. *Primary school teacher 12, school with about 50% Roma pupils*

When discussing the matter of demotivation or lacking interest in school among many Roma children, we also approached the question of identification and representation, in terms of "whose school is it?"

They don't feel that it is their school. What can we do? How can we make them value the school? *Member of school board 5, school with about 70% Roma pupils*

**Question: For instance, if you teach history... do you ever speak about the Roma people's history?**

No.

**Question: Perhaps it would be interesting... they have been here for 600 years, right?**

Well, yes... the truth is that we have never talked about this here. But the content is pretty much defined [by the Department of Education]. We don't teach Muslim history either. *Primary school teacher 18, school with 70% Roma pupils*

You know, what happens is that the Generalitat [Department of Education] controls what we can do here, and we already have lots of tasks and objectives, and many of these are about transmitting values. And we have to make them [the Roma pupils] see that ok, I am *payo* and you are *gitano*, but I understand what you are saying... I try to get closer to them so that they can see that there is not such a big distance, but it is not easy. *Primary school teacher 12, school with 50% Roma pupils*





Overall we found little or no problematisation of the educational content, or of the fact that the schools largely represent and transmit the majority culture and the majority society's view on other cultures, though several of the teachers were concerned about the lack of identification with the school among the Roma. Half of the interviewed teachers and other school staff did think that there should be more teachers of Roma origin – only one of them had ever met a teacher of Roma origin – and would like to see efforts in order to achieve this, which primarily would consist of encouraging more Roma people to study the teacher program at the university.

Yes [it would be positive with Roma teachers], and little by little it is necessary to make them see more things, have more role models... for instance [the Roma mediator at the school], it means a lot to have him here, as a reference for the children, a Roma person who achieved something.

*Member of school board 1, school with 70% Roma pupils*

Other school staff respondents, in turn, did not consider it relevant to strive for a greater representation of the Roma in schools, again reflecting the different views among teachers, also in the same school.

I don't know if there are many *gitano* teachers or not, but I don't think that it is a matter of whether the teacher is *gitano* or not, it is about sympathizing with them, that is all. Because I think that they [the Roma] need to integrate, and then they must deal with different kinds of people. I had a lot of teachers in my life and I liked some more than others. If we want the *gitanos* to reach the university they must be able to connect with different kinds of teachers. Because they are very excluding, if they don't like something, they don't want it, just like that. If they feel that you are a part of their group they accept you, but otherwise they just exclude you. *Primary school teacher 5, school with 70% Roma pupils*

#### 5.4.3. Intermediary actors

Concerning the issue of representation and perceptions on Roma culture and the Roma people, the Roma intermediary actors are themselves references and role models in their communities. They are all examples of young Roma people from disadvantaged environments, who have struggled hard and continued studying. They also play a key role to inspire the younger generations and their families, and to challenge stereotypes and perceptions on how the Roma are expected to be like, both in the Roma communities and in the majority society.

Several of the intermediary actors underline the need of breaking existing stereotypes, and to better represent Roma culture in the school material.



I think it is important to give visibility to all the positive elements related to being *gitano*, because the negative is very heavy, it has a lot of visibility, and that leads to a strong imbalance. *Representative of local community centre*

Of course, our culture must be better known. Think about the fact that we have been here for 600 years and the only thing they think they know about us is that we are “people who lie and cheat” ... And that we are singers and play the guitar... I am a musician, my father is not, ok. Of course there are lots of *gitanos* who love flamenco, but I love blues and funk... they need to learn more things about us. *Roma school mediator 2*

The issue of role models in the Roma communities is crucial.

Really, the figure of a teacher is very important, because they are dedicated to teaching children, to make them people, and what could be better than to start from diversity. And in a *gitano* neighbourhood, there should also be *gitano* teachers. *Representative of Roma association 2*

The *gitano* role models make them [the Roma pupils] see that there is a possibility, that just because you are *gitano* you do not have to quit studying. Then we break the stereotype of saying, you are *gitano*, you do not study. You are *gitano* and you can study, you can get a career. You can become a teacher, work in an organization, do whatever you like, even if you're *gitano*. It would be key for trust, knowing that there is a *gitano* teacher, who has studied. [...] Everything that the schools can do to mainstream Roma culture within the educational system would be very important, not only for the *gitano* families, but also for the teachers and for the other families. *Representative of Roma association 4*

With time they [the Roma families] will become ever more confident concerning the fact that their children study, and that this does not mean that they will lose their identity. Each time there are more role models, where they can see the future. *Roma school mediator 1*

In this context, the intermediary actors also underline the importance of including diversity into schools in order to reflect the neighbourhood's composition.

There may be the issue of not feeling part of the school. I am *gitano* but I come to a classroom where 50 or 80% are not *gitanos*, my teacher is not a *gitano*, the monitors are not *gitanos* [...] Maybe there is an internal contradiction: I am a *gitano* and I am here, but then there is nobody else. Am I doing things right? Do I have to come to school? That is the question one can ask. *Representative of Roma association 3*

It would be ideal if there were staff that could pick up the cultural reality of this area. [...] I consider it so important: people that children can meet each

day, or that they can see as someone close to them, and say "look at him, he has achieved it, why shouldn't I?" *Representative of Roma association 1*

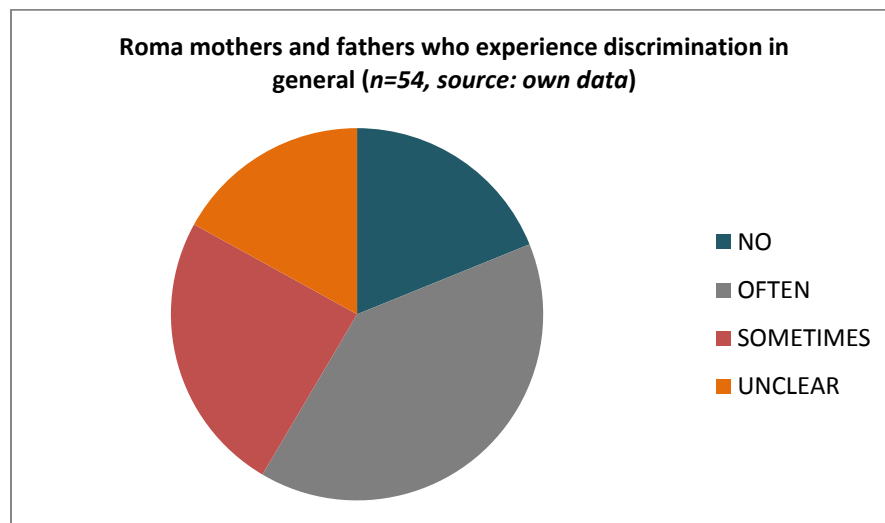
In terms of representation, equality not just in schools but also in the future access to the labour market seems to be a key element.

Right now, we [*gitanos*] have approached education due to a need for improvements, labour or salary related ones. And that is partly positive, but in part it is negative, because there are no opportunities for equal access to employment. Before, we were in the last step of the educational world, and now this has been improving, but if equality in the access to the labour market does not come, it will have an opposite effect. *Representative of local community centre*

## 5.5. Discrimination and racism

### 5.5.1. Roma families

When talking to the Roma mothers and fathers about their experiences of racism and discrimination, we distinguished between having experienced this in relation to the school, or in society in general.



We found that the experience of having felt discriminated against, looked down upon and rejected for being identified as Roma is very common among most of the respondents, and mostly takes place in public spaces or in relation to the labour market, when applying for a job, or when in employment. Analysing the profiles of the respondents who declared not to experience discrimination, what

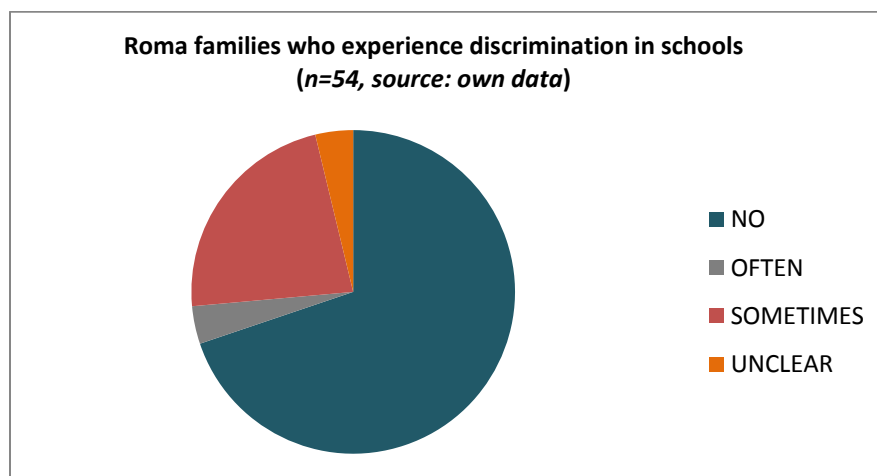
they had in common was being more light-skinned and “less Roma-looking” than average, being able to “pass for non-Roma” if they needed and desired to do so. It appears that the physical features and phenotype play a central role in the dynamics of discrimination (Hellgren, 2018<sup>23</sup>). Having dark skin is for most of the respondents with this characteristic something that influences on how they are treated: the darker skin tone a person has, the easier is it to identify him or her as Roma, and this is by the respondents perceived to influence negatively on their chances of getting an employment, or being treated with respect and friendliness in general.

I mean, yes, there is a lot of discrimination for being *gitanos*. Being as dark as I am, they discriminate me for being *gitano* or for thinking that I am an Arab, I don't know which but it doesn't matter much. *Roma father, 30 years old*

Besides the physical features, many of the respondents also agree that their way of speaking (Spanish) is a disadvantage for them:

People immediately hear how we speak and they don't want us, they look at us in a bad way. The *gitanos* who behave well, as I do, we suffer just because a few may steal and then people think that we are all the same. *Roma mother, 29 years old*

Having experienced racism/discrimination in the school was much less common, but it must be taken into account that the majority of the interviewed families went to schools with a high proportion of Roma pupils.



<sup>23</sup> Hellgren, Z. (2018) Class, race - and place: Immigrants' self-perceptions on inclusion, belonging and opportunities in Stockholm and Barcelona. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, doi 10.1080/01419870.2018.1532095



There are also several narratives reflecting how discriminatory and prejudiced attitudes from teachers in key positions have influenced strongly on the mothers and fathers' perceptions on their opportunities, and those of their children. Those who had this experience from teachers at present had in all cases taken their children to schools where the pupils are predominantly non-Roma. Overall, it was also more common that the Roma families experienced rejection from other families than from the school staff, such as for instance their children being the only ones not invited to birthday parties, or an expressed concern among the non-Roma families that the school was "becoming a gypsy school."

Ok, my son sometimes misbehaves, but they always blame him, always. They [the school staff] say that "kids are kids," but the other children called him "fucking gypsy," and they were older than him. I talked to the headmaster and found that they do nothing about it, and my son defended himself and then he was punished. [There is much racism] among the other children and their parents, they don't want their children to play with ours and that hurts a lot. They cannot understand that we have the same right to take our children to this school as they have. *Roma father, 30 years old, children in a public school with mainly non-Roma, ethnic majority children*

When I got to the university, I had the hope that I would finally be free. But no... I met teachers, one of them in criminal law, he was a person with a high position in the legal system. And in his class, without knowing who I was he said "a gypsy from La Mina will be a criminal." In front of people who studied to become police officers, prison personnel, social workers... And I just laughed and left the class, and he asked me why, and I answered "because of your ignorance." I never even wanted to explain why. And he wanted to fail me but I got a 10 so he had to let me pass. *Roma mother, 39 years old.*

[My son] left school in eighth grade, there was no way to convince him not to. And he went to [a semi-private school]. There was so much racism there, it was incredible. He was the only *gitano* in his class and the other kids gathered to beat him up, they even threw him down the stairs when he was 7 or 8 years old. And nobody did anything, I talked to the headmaster, the teachers... but they just made him change class constantly to move around the problem. He never went to a birthday party, never had any friends in school. And in sixth grade he could not stand it anymore, we changed to [public secondary school with high proportion of Roma pupils] but there was just no way to motivate him, and then he dropped out. *Roma mother, 52 years old*





All the respondents who have suffered from racism and discrimination coincide in having felt the majority society's rejection most strongly in the labour market, most importantly in access to employment. The vast majority has experienced not getting a job for being Roma.

Once during a job interview... this is such a shame. They had selected me and asked me where I was from... they thought that I was Ecuadorian. They asked what my nationality was and I said, "I am from here, Spanish, from Barcelona, and I am *gitana*." And you should have seen their faces... They just said "oh... we'll call you," but they never did. I never applied for another job after that. *Roma mother, 24 years old*

There are similar experiences from moving in public spaces: the streets and squares, public transport, the supermarkets, shopping malls, etc.

This happens all the time, in the subway, or in the streets. They say things, or look at you in a bad way. Also watching TV, the image they transmit of the *gitanos* is not good. *Roma father, 34 years old*

This will never ever change. In my son's football club, the other [non-Roma] parents tell me "I had another idea of the *gitanos* until I met you." And then at their work places they surely talk about me, saying that I am a good person, as if I were something odd, a freak, a good gypsy. *Roma father, 32 years old*

I work in [large supermarket] and there they tell us that we have to be ware if *gitanos* enter the store and follow them, so that they will not steal anything. *Non-Roma father married to Roma woman, 27 years old*

Moreover, there are many narratives of everyday "micro-racism" that may not be as evident, but equally contribute to making the people affected by it feel unwanted and humiliated.

They may say whatever they want, but a *gitano* will always be a *gitano*, somebody who is not worth very much. If I go to the supermarket, they will always follow me. Wherever I go I will always be the *gitana*. If a *payo* steals something, it is that *payo*, but if a *gitano* does it, all the *gitanos* do it. *Roma mother, 25 years old*

A central part of our project regards the expectations of the Roma families on education, and during the study we found that this is closely linked to the experiences of discrimination. If one expects to be discriminated against while trying to access employment in the future, this may significantly limit the motivation



to continue studying. Most of the respondents claim that they are worried that their children will suffer from the same kinds of racism and discrimination as themselves, and that this will limit their opportunities to have a better life in the future.

I truly hope that my daughters will not notice it. But things happen in the streets already, they call me “gypsy” and my daughters too. The other day when we were playing in a park nearby, a child yelled “gypsy” at my youngest daughter. I went to talk to his dad, a *payo* who turned red like a tomato. And I told him to educate his child, to never talk like that again. I don’t make differences between people. *Roma mother, 40 years old*

I am very worried about the day my children have to enter the labour market. Four of my children at least don’t look very *gitano*, but the fifth one, she does and that is a problem. If they see that you are *gitano*... and they see that, we don’t need to wear the flag. And if you look for a job they will not call you, but they will not tell you that this is the reason, they will just say that you don’t fit the profile even if you fit perfectly. This has happened so many times to me, I know that they don’t choose me for being *gitana* but they never tell me that. *Roma mother, 49 years old*

Another element that according to the respondents is central for whether they are discriminated against is “how much *gitano*” they appear, being aware that having a pronounced *gitano* identity is considered as something negative by the majority society. Therefore, they agree that the “less *gitano*” someone appears, the more opportunities may this person have. When trying to appear “less *gitano*,” it is central for the respondents how they dress and, particularly in the case of women, how they have their hair and what bijouterie they use. For those who are considered as not typically Roma-looking, and who can easily pass for mainstream Spanish/Catalan, for instance as they have lighter skin and hair colour, this sometimes means being torn between the personal pride and desire to “look Roma,” and the rational decision to conceal their identity in order to access employment or avoid demeaning treatment in a variety of situations.

I have suffered all the typical forms of discrimination. But I know how to dress and act *paya* and then they cannot tell [that I am Roma]. *Roma mother, 23 years old*

My son will not have problems because he is like the kids from here, you cannot tell that he is *gitano*. He is light-skinned, and we give him a good education, at home and at school. Perhaps if I had married a *gitano* he would have appeared more *gitano*, but I married a *payo* and my kid turned out normal. *Roma mother, 23 years old*



Besides the experiences of racism and discrimination, the socio-economic precariousness is one of the most central concerns for most of the respondents. There is a relationship between discrimination and precariousness, which is important to keep in mind in order to fully understand the situation of these families: wanting to take part in the majority society and accessing a regular job but constantly experiencing rejection for being Roma is a concrete example of how discrimination may perpetuate precariousness and exclusion.

### 5.5.2. School staff

As for the school staff, we were mainly interested in whether they thought that the Roma children and their families suffered much from discrimination, in school and in general, and if they thought that this could influence negatively on their educational performance. We found that this was overall not an issue that they had many reflections on or considered relevant for the situation in the school, or the relationship with the families. None of the interviewed teachers thought that there existed discrimination of Roma children in the school where they work, but instead emphasized that the schools they represent place much emphasis on being a welcoming and friendly place where these children can feel at home. Here, it needs to be noted that the schools that participated in the project are all schools with high proportions of Roma pupils (around 50% or more), and, as mentioned above, the Roma families who had negative experiences from discrimination in the school environment had suffered this in schools with predominantly non-Roma pupils.

Some of the teachers and other school staff did recognize that the Roma may have fewer opportunities in society because of their ethnicity, but overall they generally emphasized the low expectations and lack of engagement in their education as the main reason behind this. Several of them also considered this “apathetic” attitude, which some of the school staff respondents described in terms of self-exclusion or unwillingness to integrate, as related to their socioeconomic marginalization.

Sure they have fewer opportunities, but if you don't even finish compulsory school, how far can you get? That is why the mediator [*promotor escolar*, Roma mediator/role model present in public schools in Catalonia] is so important, as a role model, who could help to raise their [the Roma pupils'] expectations. *Member of school board 2, school with 95% Roma pupils*

They live in this marginality and I don't know if that is typical for the Roma in other places too, other cities, but here I think that they are pretty



comfortable with that kind of life. They depend on welfare and sometimes I don't know if... well you should not take away the subsidies, but these have generated a dependence that make them not look for anything better for themselves. *Primary school teacher 20, school with 70% Roma pupils*

### 5.5.3. Intermediary actors

In general terms, all intermediary actors suffered or witnessed experiences of racism and discrimination against Roma people, based on several stereotypes and prejudices.

Because of my physical appearance, I look like a *gitana* even before to speak. I have suffered many times, especially related to work. *Representative of Roma association 1*

Now we are a minority, but we are the result of a labelling. That is why we were seen as criminals, we dressed differently, we spoke differently and this was a crime. *Representative of local community centre*

In their view, the historical exclusion of the Roma people in Spain still has consequences in the education system.

Unfortunately, the Roma people are much stigmatized, and that creates a lot of prejudice towards us. [...] One thing to keep in mind here is that until recent times we could not even study, we did not have that privilege. And I'm not talking about before the Second World War or anything; I'm talking about much more recently. Then the *gitano*, as he has not been allowed to integrate into society, has always been a survivor. *Roma school mediator 2*

A central element of a subtler and more invisible form of discrimination, according to several of the interviewed intermediary actors, is related to the quality of education provided in schools with a high percentage of Roma pupils, which in turn is also related to residential and educational segregation. The main focus of the schools however seems to be, in the view of these intermediary actors, to reduce the absenteeism data in order to improve the school's image and comply with the requirements of the Department of Education.

Where is the motivation to study? They do not care. How many of them [Roma pupils] have graduated? They do not care. The focus has simply been that children are obliged to be in school, and that if their parents do not enrol them, the authorities must intervene. If a school does not act, it becomes responsible for this omission. *Representative of local community centre*



They [the educational system] worry about the negative figures of absenteeism, but at the same time, there is not so much concern to take measures so that the level of the school will be the same, or better, than another public school in any area. That is always secondary. [...] We are reducing absenteeism, but we are also generating a wave of people who are not prepared to continue studying, and this is making it impossible for *gitano* students to follow, to create a future, to improve, to be able to choose different lives and to do what they want. It's a bit strong to say so, but for me this is a kind of racism. *Representative of Roma association 1*

Overall, the intermediary actors talk much about discrimination of the Roma in terms of the inequality that affects them.

There is a huge inequality, and this inequality also means that in the schools where there are a lot of *gitanos* the level is lower. A child from a rich neighbourhood will have just one rock [referring to a low-performing pupil with special needs] in his class, a child from a poor neighbourhood will have 14 rocks, and will have to drag them and compete with a series of academic goals that are not covered by what has been taught in class, because there was no time. Among the schools and the universities there are lists of which are better and worse... Taking this into account, what involvement can families have? I believe that if families could decide where their children go, families who really want their children to study, who would understand and were able to undertake this cost, I believe that none of them would take their children to the schools in the neighbourhood where they live. I'm talking about the *gitano* population. *Representative of local community centre*

The intermediary actors state that racism and discrimination in social interactions and in the labour market, as extensively experienced by the interviewed Roma parents, can play a role as a disincentive for educational expectations.

Our families are very aware that these impediments [experiences of racism and discrimination] do not have to be a limit when it comes to reaching what they propose. [...] But families worry, and they know that this can happen to their children. Because of this [the discrimination] the *gitanos* have such low self-esteem, because it is very difficult, you are not with your children all the time, perhaps among children too, that child grows up with an insecurity that takes its toll. *Representative of Roma association 1*

It is also true that the *gitano*, it is not that he does not want to study; it is that he has not believed in education. Why? If two people with the same education aspire for the same job, only because of their physical appearance or their last name, the *gitano* will be rejected. The *gitano* has





experienced this social exclusion for so long. It's good to study, but for what? *Roma school mediator 1*

## 6. Conclusions

Our extensive fieldwork and qualitative analysis lend support to the argument (Bereményi and Carrasco, 2015<sup>24</sup>) that Roma families, contrary to common perceptions, do not have low expectations on the education of their children. What they often do experience is a lack of resources, economic and labour-related precariousness and frequent discrimination, which may pose obstacles for their ability to support their children's educational projects as much as they would want to. The 80 Roma mothers and fathers who participated in our project want their children to continue studying and "have a better life than themselves." Nevertheless, they are very aware of the fact that their lack of economic resources may make it difficult for them to, for instance, pay for the future university fees. Among the schools, in turn, we found that the expectations on the educational outcomes of Roma pupils were overall low, though there are important differences both between schools and between individual teachers within a school. In some schools and among some teachers, we did find an attitude that best can be described as resignation considering the future of the Roma children. It seems that the individual teacher and his/her level of involvement is crucial to support and motivate the pupils, consistent with earlier research highlighting that teacher support is particularly central when the children/youth come from socially vulnerable environments (Bereményi and Carrasco, 2017<sup>25</sup>).

Based on our findings, we argue that it is essential to work actively to increase the expectations that the school staff has on Roma children. It is absolutely fundamental that they believe in these pupils and that they are able to transmit such positive expectations to them. It is also important to continue working with the expectations of the families, and to make sure that the families' expectations are realistic. In order to do so, the schools may need to improve and develop structures of support and information about future possibilities: for instance, mentor programs; detailed and concrete, practical information about

<sup>24</sup> Bereményi, B.Á & Carrasco, S. (2015) Interrupted Aspirations: Research and Policy on Gitano Education in a Time of Recession in Spain. *Intercultural Education* Volume 26.1

<sup>25</sup> Bereményi, B.Á & Carrasco, S. (2017) Bittersweet success. The impact of academic achievement among the Spanish Roma after a decade of Roma inclusion, in *Second International Handbook of Urban Education*. Springer. Eds. William T. Pink, George W. Noblit





scholarships for higher studies, about how to reach different professions, etc., for the children and their families. This may be particularly central in secondary school, in order to motivate the students, who may want to continue studying but are uncertain of the use of these studies, or in general, of how to achieve a better future.

In this context, we also consider it necessary to revise the representation of Roma culture and people in the school system. Roma children rarely meet adults, with whom they identify, who have higher studies and stable employment; there are no Roma teachers in the schools; Roma culture and history are rarely mentioned in the classrooms. The Roma pupils virtually never see a positive image of their own culture or people of Roma origin being transmitted by the majority society. It seems central to make Roma culture and history visible in the general school curriculum (not only in schools with high proportions of Roma students), in order to influence also on the attitudes of the ethnic majority. For instance, this could be done by including Roma authors and artists in a mainstreamed way in classes about Spanish/Catalan literature, or speaking about the Roma victims of the holocaust in history class. We also believe that it would be very positive to work actively in order to recruit teachers and other role models (beyond the current school mediators) of Roma origin, so that Roma people are present in a mainstreamed way and not only to have a mediating role.

Moreover, it is fundamental that the schools are equipped with the resources necessary to be able to perform their work. During our study, we constantly encountered situations in the schools where the school staff claimed that the scarcity of resources—aggravated by the cuts justified by the financial crisis—made it practically impossible for them to provide even a minimum of support. For instance, in one school with significant needs of basic assistance, the social worker in charge of providing this could not even attend a third of the families demanding her services during the few weekly hours that she was assigned to do this work. Children in need of extra learning support, which in the schools that participated in our project are many, can at present not always be given the attention that is necessary for them in order to complete primary school successfully. This is a problem beyond the scope of our project, which focused mainly on the relationship between the schools and the families. Nevertheless, we reached the conclusion that the situation can hardly improve much in practice if it is not also addressed at the structural level.

We also conclude that there is a need for a deeper and more comprehensive view on school failure, taking into account, for instance, what are the underlying reasons when a child does not go to school. Based on our empirical study, we found that what the school may perceive as a lack of interest or



involvement may simply reflect a life situation that is difficult to sustain. It appears necessary to approach the situation of the Roma children and their families at multiple levels, in order to seriously foster an improvement of their school achievement. At the structural/institutional level, we believe that it is necessary to, for instance, evaluate the intervention of the social services (so that the teachers do not have to perform their work) and the protocols for absenteeism (there are signals that there is insufficient or inadequate implementation when it comes to Roma children and youth), to revise the resources for schools with special needs, and, at a general level, work to combat racism and discrimination, and to improve the economic and labour related prospects and social mobility in marginalized residential areas.

At the level of individual schools, we believe that the schools could work to increase their awareness, understanding and flexibility in order to find viable channels for communication, even if this means that they may have to reconsider current norms and practices. It is important that all teachers and other school staff are trained to make sure that their attitudes towards the Roma families are egalitarian and inclusive at all times, and such teacher training and awareness-raising ought to be necessary both at the university programs for future teachers, and as part of the continuous professional training for practicing teachers.

As for the Roma families, finally, we specifically encouraged them to become actively involved in local organizations as the schools' parent associations, and turn to the local Roma associations if they need assistance and information on how to do this. Being formally organized is important in order to gain access to (a more egalitarian) communication with school staff and authorities, and be able to formally present suggestions and applications, for instance.



## Evaluation by the project participants

Throughout the project, we regularly evaluated the implemented activities and meetings, internally and with the partners. The partners gave us their evaluations in the form of verbal feedback during our meetings with them, and we maintained a continuous dialogue and exchange of feedback with them and the associate partner. The participants in the project, the Roma families, community representatives and the school staff, were also asked to evaluate the project and to contribute to the suggestions that formed the basis for the model for good practices, during the interviews. Their opinions and concerns and/or suggestions were central in the project, and we included them in the project data and incorporated them in the analysis.

Our personal relation with the project participants and our attitudes, showing that we were there to listen and learn from the participants, were fundamental for getting access to all the information they provided us with. It was also essential as we placed much emphasis on the project objective of “bringing the university closer” to the Roma families. The closing event on June 15, 2018, organized at the university venue, played a symbolic role for this, and was much appreciated by the attending Roma families, school staff and institutional actors.

## Feedback from our partners

### Rromane Siklövne:

“This project gave us the opportunity to take the next step that we as association had wanted to take: to initiate more concrete interventions with mothers and fathers in order to accomplish that education would be given the importance it deserves within the Roma communities. We decided to conduct this new initiative towards the families and schools we already had been working with earlier, and focus on making the mothers and fathers participate in educational activities together with their children, and sometimes also with the teachers.

Altogether, this project has been a very positive experience, and we are achieving results that we honestly could not imagine a year ago. During the first term of the project, we managed to make fathers who had previously never entered the school building to participate in workshops with their children. This has a strong impact on the school staff and on us as organization, but most particularly so on the children,



who for the first time saw their fathers participate in educational tasks together with them. During the later stage of the project, we have also focused on reflections with the families, and discuss how to continue the work with them, planning new activities.”

*Pedro Casermeiro, head of Rromane Siklövne*

## **Fundació Privada Pere Closa**

"The participation of Fundació Privada Pere Closa in the Vakeripen project has helped to consolidate our community work, promoting the construction of educational communities in a series of schools with many stigmas linked to school failure, early school leaving, and processes of marginality related to the schooling of Roma students.

From this perspective, the work done with the Roma families (mothers and fathers) of the students in the different participating neighbourhoods, has achieved that their interlocution be seen as that of any other educational agent, with a very close function and with a high consideration on the value of education. It has thus been empowering for the Roma families to participate. This exercise of community work is one of the key tools for the Roma people to continue advancing in our recognition, our rights and our interest in having a key position in all spheres of society.

In relation to the teaching staff, it is necessary to highlight the great work of the team of the Territorial Services of the Departament d'Ensenyament (Department of Education) to facilitate the participation of its professionals. Both the training carried out with a formal character and the non-formal daily work spaces that have been generated have served to improve the knowledge of the Roma culture and the different social realities of the neighbourhoods, and to position the strategies for generating increasing educational expectations among the schools.

In general, for us as partner this project has been a very positive experience that has helped to visualize and empirically demonstrate some of the results that have been achieved in other projects of ours. Thanks to the collaboration of the partners and the predisposition of the leader to adjust the project to the needs of the neighbourhoods, important achievements have been made, such as the approach of the university to the families, or the participation in activities linked to educational centres. At a first glance, these results are perhaps not important, but they have had a very considerable impact on the teachers, on us in our everyday work, and



especially on the students who have seen their families work in full cooperation for the implementation or development of an educational activity.

Regarding the sustainability of the project, since the beginning of this new school year (2018 - 2019), some workshops / reflection spaces have been included with the families and professionals of the educational services to see how the work can be continued. We also plan possible actions that should continue to help improving the family-school relationship as a determining factor in the educational success of Roma students.

*Miguel Ángel Franconetti, representative of Fundació Privada Pere Closa*

## Feedback from our Associate Partners

### Barcelona City Council

“I have participated in the project during the roundtable on November 29th, the workshop at the Office for Non-discrimination (Barcelona City Council) and the closing conference. My general evaluation of the project is that it stands out through defining the communication between families and the educational staff as central, and place the emphasis here in order to combat exclusion and school failure. I found the roundtable including professionals and associations with expertise in the Roma and education very interesting, given its focus on the exchange of experiences and the possibility to learn different perspectives. The set questions to discuss helped stimulating the discussion and allowed to contrast different points of view. I think that the area where we need to work the most is to make the families more active, which is difficult as there are few spaces where the Roma families can have a leading role and not always depend on being represented by associations. This project has represented an advancement in this line of work.”

*Sílvia Serra Aranda, Secretary of the Municipal Council of the Roma people at the Direction of services for citizenship rights and diversity, Barcelona City Council*

### The Office for Non-Discrimination, Barcelona (OND)

“I must say that as representative of the Office for non-discrimination, I and my staff have felt very well received by the people who attended the events where we participated, the workshop at OND and the final conference. The workshop was constructive and its dynamics good both in terms of learning from each other and



active participation of all attendants. It was also positive that [the Roma participants] gave many examples of lived experiences of discrimination, though sometimes this may have generated a feeling of too much intensity and at times, chaos.

The closing session, the final conference, was for me a great moment of recognition and claims-making. It was very important that so many of the participating families were present, and also that the headmasters of the three main schools involved were there. Considering the reactions from the audience concerning some of the conclusions of the study, it was clear that there still is much work to be done in terms of building bridges, participation, implication and self-critique of all parties involved.

The results and conclusions of your work are still not published, but without having them at hand I am able to say that you are performing a very complex task that has much merit for the claims-making of Roma people in the educational sphere. The methodology that you have incorporated may help to construct patterns of participation and collaboration between all the parties involved, and serve to dismantle some of the stereotypes about the Roma and their view on education. Thank you!"

*Albert Fagés, Director of the Office for Non-discrimination (OND), Barcelona*

## Feedback from the Roma families

As mentioned above, the evaluation of the families' participation in the project has been done verbally and continuously during the project's duration. We have maintained conversations with them throughout and asked them what they think about the project, what could improve, etc. Overall they have expressed that they much appreciate being asked for their opinion and actively included, instead of, as many of those who have been approached by other projects earlier expressed, merely feeling like a "study object." They however also expressed their (well-founded) skepticism concerning how much positive change can actually be achieved through a single project with a limited duration. Therefore, in our dialogues with the families we have emphasized that we are obviously aware of these limitations, but that we mainly aimed to stimulate dynamics in the relation between the families and the schools that the participants can continue after the project is concluded. According to our Roma participants in particularly some of the target neighbourhoods, they feel that this has been accomplished.





Below follow some specific comments regarding each of the participating neighbourhoods.

## La Mina

In La Mina, due to availability only Roma mothers were able to participate in the project. This may partly represent a shortcoming as we lack the voice of the fathers in this neighbourhood, but also an advantage in the dynamics during the dialogue meetings we organized here, where the mothers felt completely at ease and expressed thoughts and concerns that they said they were not used to verbalizing. After the last meeting was concluded they explicitly thanked us for organizing this activity and asked if there would be a continuation. They all agreed that the format (several dialogue meetings combined with in-depth interviews with each of the participants) was very good as it allowed them to reflect upon their many concerns in relation to the schooling of their children in an atmosphere where they felt relaxed and not judged, which is not very common for them.

Our two local representatives, Nieves Heredia and Marta Bonet, who recruited the participants and set up the meetings, expressed that they have participated in several other European projects and both themselves and the mothers in La Mina considered this one to be different and more appealing for them as it actively includes the Roma parents, seeks to establish egalitarian and lasting relations with them, and is focused on their experiences and opinions, instead of studying them “from the outside.”

## El Gornal

In El Gornal, besides the general positive dynamics that the families expressed that were generated through being given the chance to discuss their concerns in a relaxed atmosphere (the meetings with the Roma families took place in the venue of the local Roma association Lacho Bají Calí), our local Roma contact persons here emphasized how important our presence have been to empower them in their relation with the school. A concrete result of the changing dynamics during the project's presence in the neighbourhood is that the parents' association (AMPA) at the Gornal school has gained “new life”, becoming much more active. At present the parents involved in the association are mobilizing to apply for money from the local city council in order to take over the management of the school's lunch room and hire Roma staff to serve the food and monitor the children. Several of the parents in El Gornal were worried about the chaotic and conflictive situations



during the lunch hours and claimed that they needed presence of Roma staff who could communicate better with the children. They perceived that the children were being harassed by the present, non-Roma lunchroom monitors.

## Bon Pastor

Our local Roma representatives in Bon Pastor, as well as the families themselves, have been unanimously positive towards the projects as it gave them the opportunity to meet and discuss topics related to education that they were concerned about but had not found a forum to express. The sense that the project helped them “put words on their concerns” has been shared by the families in all the neighbourhoods. Also the participating school (El Til·ler) was positive as families who would not normally attend school meetings entered the school in relation to the project activities, functioning thus as a bridge to establish a more fluid relationship between the school staff and these families.

## Sant Roc

In Sant Roc, the local representatives also expressed that the project had benefitted the families in terms of their implication in education matters and general empowerment. When we talked with the families here, they emphasized how the project had helped them becoming more aware of their right to have expectations and demand the best for their children. One mistake that we committed here, and that we have evaluated internally and taken much into account, is that we were absent for a long period of time after the initially phase with many dialogue meetings during a short time period in the spring of 2017. This absence was due to intense work in the other neighbourhoods at this time, but not being simultaneously active in Sant Roc made the families disconnect from the project. We also understood from the reactions of the local representatives that they were disappointed with the lack of continuity, and when we wanted to reinitiate our activities here in the beginning of 2018, there was little responsiveness. We will however try to continue our contact with the Roma families in Sant Roc after the project is concluded.