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Intercultural Mediation for the School-to-Work Transition, as a Technique of Neoliberal Governmentality



ABOUT THE PROJECT

This paper was prepared in the framework of the project “NGOization of school-to-work transition among Roma youth” (NGOST, <https://cps.ceu.edu/research/ngost>). NGOST is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship funded by the European Union under the Horizon 2020 Program (Grant Agreement n° 845196), running from September 2019 through August 2021.

NGOST is a comparative research project conducted in three EU countries: Hungary, Slovakia and Spain. The project aims at critically examining policies and programmes that support school-to-work transition (STWT) reaching out to Roma youth. It focuses particularly on the ‘NGOization’ of STWT programmes, that is the delegation of state functions to private entities, as a technique of neoliberal governance of minorities.

This paper focuses on sociocultural/intercultural mediation as a public intervention that aims to promote the school-to-work transition (STWT) of Roma youth at the municipal level. The empirical data for this study was collected through interviews with a Roma intercultural mediator, a Roma ‘school promoter’, 20 technicians from the municipal public services and 31 young Roma in a medium-sized city in Catalonia (Spain), in 2020 and 2021.

ABOUT THE PAPER SERIES

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AS A TECHNIQUE OF NEOLIBERAL GOVERNMENTALITY

Abel Beremenyi

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INTRODUCTION

This study offers a preliminary analysis of the municipal socio-cultural mediation service aimed at the Roma population of a city, and specifically seeks to understand to what extent this intervention favours the school-to-work transition (STWT) of Roma youth.

This data exploitation is part of a larger two-year-long, cross country comparative project funded by the European Commission¹. The research aims to analyse the public policies and institutional dynamics that condition STWT, as well as the transition experiences lived by Roma young people themselves, in three European countries: Hungary, Slovakia, Spain. This preliminary analysis will centre on the data collected in the Spanish fieldwork, and I seek answers to the two interrelated questions.

1. What are the achievements and challenges of a Roma intercultural mediation project in a local context?
2. To what extent a Roma intercultural mediation can contribute to structural changes?

THE ROMA POPULATION, 'OBJECT' OF INTERVENTIONS

The Roma population represents the largest ethnic minority in the Spanish State, which has historically been the target of ethnically targeted policies and interventions, often motivated by racist stereotypes, repressive political interests and have had negative socio-economic and psycho-affective consequences, contributing to the reproduction of their marginalized social position (Laparra, 2009; San Román, 1994).

Access to the European Union made it possible for Spain to establish the fundamentals of a welfare state and for the Roma people to have a full access to general public services (Carrasco and Poblet 2019). While a growing network of NGOs offered care at the local level (Rodríguez, 2011). Dynamic growth of economic sectors that required little training, and low skills, has favoured the Roma people's access to the labour market and hence, a certain social mobility of a significant proportion of Roma families. The Spanish Roma population is a highly heterogenous one in all aspects (Carrasco & Poblet, 2019; Laparra, 2011), inner diversity is also present in local communities. There is a growing elite group, with advanced studies, integrated jobs and/or with a socioeconomic level comparable to the majority population (Bereményi, 2018; Bereményi & Carrasco, 2017; Brüggemann, 2015) of their social environment.

1 This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant agreement No 845196.

Even so, a large part of the Roma population is among the most disadvantaged sectors in the areas of education, employment, health and housing, also taking into account the growing racism and discrimination against them (Felguerosa 2018; Carrasco and Poblet 2019 ; Foessa 2018; Hernández Pedreño, M. ; García Luque, O; Gehrig, R. 2019; FSG 2016; Hojsik and Fremlova 2020).

In the domain of employment, initiatives have recently multiplied through “active labour market policies” (ALMP), targeted to the vulnerable population, particularly the Roma, from the national and regional employment services. Along these lines, the employment measures financed through European Structural Funds are highlighted, by the operational programme “Fight against discrimination” that in Spain was implemented by the Fundación Secretariado Roma (FSG) (Laparra et al., 2013). Within this framework of measurement, the ACCEDER programme has generated international recognition as a complex action targeted to the Roma population with a social and cultural sensitivity, but also facilitating access to general employment services, and aiming to raise awareness of the employing companies. However elsewhere (Messing et al., 2013; Messing & Bereményi, 2017) we observe that the privileged situation of the FSG and particularly of the ACCEDER programme, turns attention to a single programme and forgets the results of many other more humble or no ethnically targeting training or employment programmes, as well as the temporary employment agencies that at times of conjuncture facilitated the access of Roma families to employment, not necessarily of a lower quality than ACCEDER.

ROMA POPULATION AND TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL / TRAINING TO EMPLOYMENT

Representative studies coincide in stating that there is a wide gap between the Spanish Roma and non-Roma youth population, leaving the former vulnerable in all areas of life. The educational expansion of the last three decades undoubtedly shows positive signs in the schooling and education of Roma people in Spain. In 2013, virtually all Roma young people of 16-19 years of age completed the first six school grades, but only a quarter (25%) of them obtained a certificate of completion of the lower secondary years (7-10) grades, and only 7.4% of upper secondary (Baccalaureate or VET). In order to illustrate the gap, in the non-Roma population, 25% of that 16-19 age group has completed an upper secondary training (and many more tertiary education). Furthermore, the proportion of those who choose a vocational track as opposed to an academic track is way higher among the Roma young people, than their non-Roma peers (FSG & CEET, 2013).

Since the 1970s, one of the most important forms of work and sources of income for Roma became trading at weekly street markets as well as collecting scrap metal. As a result, many Roma families have caught up with the consumer habits of the working class and have secured some financial stability, which has been reversed in the last two major recessions. In addition, many have been working as unskilled workers in the construction and service industries. But in recent decades, there have also been masses of Roma workers in the manufacturing and processing factories and service industries (cleaning, public transport, shops, etc.) (Sánchez-Rubio & Fernández, 2011). According to statistics (FSG and EDIS, 2012), Roma workers have worse working conditions than “Payo” (i.e. non-Roma) Spanish

workers, receiving lower wages and shorter-term or part-time contracts. As a result of the consecutive crises (2008, 2020) Roma communities' living conditions have worsened disproportionately more than the overall Spanish society.

Without going into more details here, I can confirm that the general trends can be observed in the city under scrutiny as well: their housing, education/training, work, and health conditions are complemented by the discrimination they suffer in many areas of life. All these aspects place the Roma population in a situation of vulnerability. The accelerated sociocultural and demographic change of the Spanish Roma must also be taken into account, as well as the heterogeneity of their coping strategies.

The incorporation of Roma youth into the labour market is earlier, with less preparation, in more unfavourable working conditions (hours, shifts, contracts, health effects, remuneration), with a later withdrawal from the labour market, and with levels of unemployment higher than the non-Roma population. Furthermore, the vulnerability of Roma women is evident.

In the observed city, programmes and services delivered by various departments are available to improve the living conditions of Roma families. The most notable are Social Services, Education, Employment Development and Youth. However, all the technicians consulted agree on that the Roma community access services much less frequently than the rest of the society. Several NGOs reach out to Roma families both to provide them with services and to link them with specialist services. However, this attention does not reach out all Roma families and young people. They are segmented and unevenly distributed among city districts. Interviews with Roma young people from different neighbourhoods reveal that the young people's knowledge about programmes, services and other opportunities is scarce, biased and linked to people of reference such as teachers, monitors, social services technicians, or the intercultural mediator, among others.

ANTECEDENTS: INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION SERVING ROMA COMMUNITIES

At a European level, a broad debate has emerged, as a result of ROMED² (European Programme for the Training of Romani Mediators) initiative, launched in 2011, jointly by the Council of Europe and the European Commission, in 20 countries, including Spain. The programme drew criticism from diverse perspectives. Some of the most relevant points of criticisms are the following. Kyuchukov (2012) highlights the precarious conditions of Roma mediators: their inferior status to other technicians who carry out similar tasks, their political / existential dependence on both the organisation that employ them, as well as on community leaders. These circumstances mean that the results of the mediation are especially conditioned by the professional and personal quality of the mediator, which draws attention to the disproportionate responsibility that usually weighs on the shoulders of this professional. These observations are very important to our analysis. Furthermore, Kyuchukov warns that often the work of the mediator is limited to reactive and administrative tasks, but he or she is rarely included in broader and long-term planning processes of the phenomena they seek to solve, a fact that leads to incongruities, contradictions and dilemmas in their job. Mediation and the mediator himself can be instrumentalised

2 <https://www.coe-romed.org/>

by public administration in order for them to avoid direct contact with the community, but at the same time, to introduce changes without any participatory and active negotiation with various sectors of the community. Clark (2018) within health promotion as well as in improving access to educational opportunities goes further and emphasizes that the good results in specific contexts do not justify mediation as an adequate vehicle to solve structural problems related to poverty, discrimination and social exclusion. According to him, mediation can even hamper the community to express demands for greater justice, equality and freedoms. It is necessary to have a deep, extensive and continuous training of not only the Roma mediators, but also the community and the technical team of the administrations to enable their meaningful and effective participation in the process.

In recent years, this debate has intensified through a series of studies which take a more generic view of this intervention model and develop the most structural criticisms. Along these lines, Kóczé (2019) calls the social inclusion that is pursued through mediation illusory. The political objectives that motivate the discourse and language of mediation transmit control and securitisation of underdeveloped populations, which represent a source of insecurity for the authorities. Kóczé's central argument is that the institutionalisation of Roma intercultural mediation has occurred in relative isolation from large political infrastructures and therefore it depoliticizes the structural problem, reducing it to a micro level. Helakorpi and colleagues (2019) show that the public administration and organisations instrumentalise the school mediator making them accountable for the problem related to Roma students, while getting rid of any responsibility of the structural-institutional origin of the phenomenon. Kühlbrandt (2019) brings to light the contradictions of Roma health mediators. He concludes that the mediation that seeks to promote the emancipation of the Roma communities ends up reproducing racist prejudices related to the reproductive health of Roma women, and in this way, the mediators become accomplices of these perverse dynamics. Their training plan is limited to identifying and acting on individual factors of the problem, and their way of working is controlled and governed by protocols developed by non-Roma professionals. Petraki (2020) also studies Roma health mediators and proposes that mediation is used to reinforce a "consensus narrative" among professionals and researchers on how to describe and represent the health phenomena related to the Roma population. The author denounces that in this type of mediation the administrations and institutions do not create spaces and dynamics that allow expressing, knowing and defining the health priorities of the communities themselves, but rather subtly impose their expert model. Ortiz-Cobo and Bianco (2020), reinforce the previous criticisms, highlighting that schools miss the potential of intercultural school mediation (in this case with an immigrant population). They also describe the paradox that the marginalisation of this service focusing only on immigrant students and families, the complete lack of bidirectionality of the process and the fact that families, in their daily practice, apply other forms of mediation have contributed to the recreation of 'differences' through assimilation processes, ethnification and stigmatisation of immigrant groups.

For this paper, the title of Kostka's (2015) article is especially relevant: "defining the problem matters". As Carlos Giménez (1997) comments in his seminal work, the *raison d'être* of mediation is conflict. In his interpretation, intercultural mediation is about 1) the ethnic-cultural difference of the participants; 2) the significant incidence of ethnic-cultural difference in the relationship between the parties (ignorance, prejudices, stereotypes). Giménez describes the context and the objective of intercultural mediation as follows: "in social situations of significant multiculturalism, in which the professional builds bridges or links between these different actors or social agents, in order to prevent

and / or solve and / or reform possible conflicts and enhance communication, but above all, with the ultimate goal of working in favour of intercultural coexistence” (Giménez 2002: 66, quoted by Ortiz-Cobo & Bianco, 2020). Undoubtedly, this is the conflict-centred rationale that most mediation projects adopt, though I believe that this should not be the only possible and legitimate justification.

However, while Giménez details the structural conditioning factors and the necessary incidents of an ideal mediation, in its implementation this does not usually occur. Research, as I have shown above, is often faced with this argumentative framework to divert attention from structural-institutional disfunctions at the macro level, to the problematisation of the ethnic-cultural difference, in terms of coexistence, at the micro level. In this argumentative framework, unemployment and barriers to access to the labour market are explained (at least partially) by ethnic-cultural factors. Instead of exploring and allocating efforts to repair mechanisms of segregation and unequal access to public and private goods, which sustain or even aggravates injustices from generation to generation, proposals focused on ethnic-cultural difference, often perceive Roma as a potential danger to public order, and at the same time, as potentially “re-educable”, “moldable”, “activatable” citizens (Picker & Roccheggiani, 2013). Vincze (2012) in this sense, argues that the relationship between Roma and non-Roma is often represented as of an inborn difference, and the solution is projected in a “process of transforming marginal people into individuals who are able to meet the requirements set up by neoliberal ways of living without amending it” (2012, p. 1).

THEORETICAL-ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Incorporating various elements of the critical contributions from previous discussions on intercultural mediation as a technology of minority governance, I propose an analytical framework based on the following concepts. On the one hand, the “neoliberal governmentality” and “technologies of the self” introduced by Foucault (1988) and developed by other authors (Lemke, 2001; Miller & Rose, 1990; Pyysiäinen et al., 2017; Rose et al., 2006; Wacquant, 2012), on the other hand “activation” (van Baar, 2012) is a key concepts for this analysis.

With the words of Wacquant (2012), neoliberalism is observed in the reconfiguration of the state as the main agent that actively fabricates subjectivities, social relations and collective representations, adjusting reality to the creation of the market fiction. For Wacquant, neoliberalism as a political project includes the redesign of the state, and in this the transformation of social policies into a kind of “workfare” policies with disciplinary / correctional elements (among others), and the incorporation of discourses on individual responsibility as a motivating aspect.

Studies on governmentality envision a neoliberalism in which a set of a flexible, moldable and adaptable notions, strategies and technologies aim at shaping populations and societies (Wacquant 2012). In this sense, neoliberalism rather than an ideology or politics, it is understood as a “generalized normativity”, “global rationality” that not only serves to govern, but also to structure and organize the behaviour of the governed themselves, as well as to reconfigure their self-perceptions according to the logic of competition, efficiency and utility (Dardot and Laval 2007 cited by Wacquant 2012. p.70). To achieve this, according to Foucault (1988), governance is developed through different “technologies of

the self”, which allow individuals to carry out “a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being,” (1988, p. 18). As Miller and Rose comment, governance operates on subjects through demands to translate norms, criteria, and forms of evaluation into values, decisions, and individual judgments about their capabilities (2008, p. 42). Thus, subjects are objects of control through the incorporation of norms, criteria and behaviours and at the same time, agents of their propagation. The subjects of neoliberal governance are partners in the construction of neoliberal norms (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017). The concept of “activation” responds to this demand, which van Baar (2012) develops with respect to inclusion policies aimed at the Roma population, aiming to improve the “inactivity” figures of marginalized sectors, and to increase their human and social capital, in order to thus overcome the transgenerational dependence on social transfers. Activation is therefore understood as a discourse on the desirable way of life for marginalized or vulnerable populations, responding to commercial logic as a guarantee of their own social integration.

A directly related concept is that of “responsibility” (Lemke, 2001) of the individual, or “self-responsibility” for his or her development in society, a demand to be active, entrepreneurial, creative, willing, flexible in the face of possibilities, willing to mould himself to the economic expectations of society (Rose et al., 2006).

These key concepts will help us organize, analyse and interpret our empirical data, focusing on both the discourse and the practice of intercultural (sociocultural) mediation, from the points of view of the service beneficiaries and the providers as well.

METHOD

This paper draws on the Spanish fieldwork of the EU-funded NGOST project. Data collection was conducted in a regional capital city in Catalonia (Spain), with approximately 220,000 inhabitants. Interviews were conducted with 31 Roma young people and 20 professionals of main municipal public services and NGOs organisations working with young people. Due to the fact, that data collection was made during the COVID pandemic between July 2020 and February 2021, most interviews were conducted online (zoom, Skype, etc.). Both the interviews and the subsequent analysis were carried out by a non-Roma researcher and two Spanish Roma co-researchers. The co-researchers have several distant family members in the investigated city, which also helped achieve deeper information about the local Roma community, despite difficulties related to Covid-pandemic. The intercultural mediator played an important role in recruiting interviewees in her district, and to contextualise local dynamics of the community. We had repeated personal meetings with her, phone-calls, and WhatsApp chat conversations throughout the data collection period. The recorded conversations with her have a duration of 135 minutes. All interviewees’ oral informed consents were recorded at the beginning of the interview-conversations. Interviews were transcribed and the text was analysed through Atlas.ti 8.0 qualitative data analysis software. Data analysis began with a short preliminary code-list that was intuitively complemented through in-vivo coding, that is, codes derived from the data itself in an inductive manner. Several earlier versions of this text (translated into Spanish) have been discussed with Roma co-researchers, and their reflections have been incorporated in its present form.

RESULTS

In the next section I will present the legal-institutional framework of the mediation project of the observed municipality. Then I will present the results derived from the collected qualitative data.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF MEDIATION

Intercultural mediation with Roma people appears both in the “National Strategy for the social inclusion of the Roma population in Spain 2012-2020” (NRIS) and in the “Comprehensive Plan for the Roma People in Catalonia 2017-2020” (PIPG). The NRIS frames elements of mediation in various specific objectives under the domains of education, employment and “other specific lines of action”. To mention but a few, NRIS foresees the “Promotion of mediation programmes between families and the school, encouraging the incorporation of Roma experts”; and “the training of Roma experts in mediation and in other areas of social action”.

The PIPG makes it possible through the objective defined in the “Contract Programme 2018-19” [File 30.1 Sociocultural Mediation Programme (Attention to the Roma People)] for some towns and cities to contract an intercultural mediator over a significant period of time. This represents “a new framework of coordination, cooperation and collaboration between the Department of Labor, Social Affairs and Families [of the Catalan Government] and local entities to allow a provision and management of social services that responds to criteria of joint responsibility, transparency, territorial equity”. The previous PIPG (2014-2016) established the objective to implement actions that make mediation actions possible between the Roma community and non-Roma society in order to “build bridges of understanding, which avoid conflict or minimize it, if it arises, that show the diversity of the society in which we live and bring the reality of the Roma community closer together, so that it is taken into account when designing and implementing public policies”. Likewise, the **Roma mediator is defined** as a community agent whose objective is: a) to advance the access of the Roma population in different domains of the local community; b) to sensitize the rest of the population and inform them about the Roma culture, and c) to stimulate participatory and training processes in the neighbourhood. According to this programme, **sociocultural mediation** aims to a) contribute to the detection of social needs of the Roma population; b) study what resources are available in the neighbourhoods; c) coordinate different actions and initiatives integrated into existing projects and offer them to the Roma population; d) connect with the different agents involved in the territories with a Roma population; e) encourage participatory and training processes for the Roma people in the neighbourhood; f) promote the visibility of the Roma people in society as a whole; g) promote actions to improve the employability and social and labour market integration of the Roma.

Undoubtedly, the definition is complex and balanced which, beyond the social objectives, also takes into account the employment conditions of the mediator. In short, the mediator facilitates access, sensitizes (all parties), encourages and promotes. Below I show, through a case study, how these objectives have been carried out in one particular urban context.

"THEY TELL ME, AND I HELP THEM GET ACCESS" - MEDIATION ACHIEVEMENTS

María, the district's Roma mediator, has access to the municipality's emerging training and job opportunities and considers herself effective in linking demands with supply. Knowing the people of the neighbourhood, she manages with agility the pool of people who may need, is willing or who directly request her to take advantage of resources provided by public and private services. For many years, the training offers in the municipality have reached the Roma population of the neighbourhood through the intermediation of María.

Now, that she [my mother] is older, she has been doing the training courses that María manages. I think she did one on IT and another I don't know what it was about, I think she took two courses. [young Roma woman]

This quote illustrates well that the way María manages the course offer, she reaches several generations. As it is a local community, with only a few extended Roma families with a relatively good coexistence, María's role as a known community agent is essential for the proper development of her work as a mediator. Members of her extended family are the primary beneficiaries of her professional experience and availability, although she offers her services to the entire Roma community, irrespective of the clients' family belonging.

The one who influenced me a lot was María [...] well, since I was very out of control at that time, I didn't want to study, I didn't want to do anything and she was the one who fought a lot to get me to do something, "Sign up for a course!", and she went and signed me up for the course, the one that trains me to become a children's instructor. Thanks to her I am where I am. That if she hadn't been stubborn with me, I wouldn't have been here [young Roma woman]

This memory of her role as a relevant caring agent is repeated by many interviewees of her district. Her influence as reference agent is more limited with respect to young people who have no kinship bonds with her.

What I want to do now, because with Covid it's difficult for me to find [work], [...] but when I can, I will talk to María, I want studies [...] I don't know if the adult school, I have been looking it, I have been with an educator from Employment Office who advised me to apply for a VET, she says 'there you can access the VET degree' [young Roma woman]

The staff of Social Services, Employment or Education Department tend to notify María directly about the new opportunities. And she even has a certain room to decide on the most suitable person or at least she can influence the decision by contextualizing favourably or not each client.

I received a scholarship when I did the hairdressing stuff, I don't know [what it was called]. I did the first course and, in the summer I got paid, it was almost two thousand euros [young Roma woman]

This young Roma woman did an initial VET in hairdressing and the details of the scholarship were managed by her mother with the mediator. Although the amount was significant, the beneficiary only knew that it had to do with María, that is, with the role of facilitating the service. She was not precisely informed about the entire process of application and justification of the scholarships from the Ministry of Education. Neither she was informed about other grant possibilities.

The mediator also facilitates access of young people to Active labour market policy (ALMP) training programmes (for example, in the project called “Work in the neighbourhoods”)

Right now, I have just inserted seven-eight kids in a... and they are in the Workshop School, a bricklaying training, and painting... [María, mediator]

María also has some influence on the decision of who to contract under the framework of the “Municipal Employment Plan”. She may justify need with family situation (young couples with children), or with meritocratic arguments (people with the intention of making the most of the corresponding training).

María tells me “Do you want to work?”. I say “yes”. She didn’t even tell me the job, eh? I said, “yes, yes”. “You are going to earn a thousand euros a month as a street sweeper. Do you want?” I say “yes”. “I’m going to mark you as the preferred option, okay? Let’s see, I can’t contract you just like that, it’s the City Council that will decide. But I’m going to give you the priority that you are in need [...] a street sweeper public employment scheme, cleaning the public highway, 6 months and such with a gross salary of a thousand euros”. And there I saw the light... [young Roma man]

This young head of the family, without previous training, and throughout his life working at the flea market, he got to know María in the neighbourhood. He approached her with a clear demand: in her critical situation with no income and with a new-born baby, he wants to access a job because he no longer sees any economic future in the flea market. He “saw the light” in terms of alternative income, future plans and perspectives beyond the 6 months of “Employment plan” contract.

This case presents the relevance of the mediator as a facilitator of access to public employment schemes. María also organized a course for those over 25, who planned to access the university (subsidised by the Comprehensive Roma Plan). Other initiatives like this latter one can also require a lot of work despite their limited success.

It was organised be done, but the guys didn’t come. They did not attend the course, despite the fact that they had made the demand. [María, mediator]

On the other hand, María is very sensitive and proactive in detecting needs and demands of any segment of the community. Usually, she successfully manages them. A good example for this, is when a group of Roma young people asked for a space where they can exercise sports in safe conditions.

15-20 young people. The kids made this demand [María, coordinator]

She saw an opportunity in this incentive to encourage young people to attend school.

If you attend school, you can attend soccer and Muay Thai training. It worked very well. But due to Coronavirus, trainings were cancelled. [María, mediator]

As she explains, she registers a list of potential beneficiaries for all type of programmes: educational, recreational / free time, training, support services, job insertion, or job placement.

When I receive an offer, I immediately call everyone here [María, mediator]

Undoubtedly, her flagship action is the repeatedly organised training of Roma women and men for leisure time instructors, financed by different public administrations. This has allowed the access of young and middle-aged people to the labour market with conditions that are reconcilable with their social role in the community. María calls free-time instructor “an ideal job” for women who want to stay close to the neighbourhood. A “Payo job” [non-Roma job] that has nevertheless obtained acceptance among Roma families.

All of us did it: my cousins of the same age came and some non-Roma from the district also attended... [Young Roma woman]

This latter young woman values the leisure-time instructor course very positively, which she completed many years ago and which allowed her to develop a professional career in this field in various educational centres of the city, with a work schedule that made it possible for her to fulfil her reproductive roles assigned by her family. Another woman who attended the leisure-time instructor course also achieved subsequently a job, not only thanks to this training, but also to María’s extended network of contacts in the schools of the city.

Later, I went into dining rooms [as children’s instructor]. Yes, thanks to María [...] she called there. I did the interview. It went well and they hired me [young Roma woman]

The organization of training courses seems to be a good choice to enter those into the labour market who never did before. As Roma leisure time instructors often get contracted in schools and community centre with a high number of Roma children, here women and men can capitalise on their ethnic-cultural origin in a positive way.

I’m still unemployed as I was not contracted [in a supermarket where I did the internship], and that was when my aunt María said, ‘There is a course for instructors, will you get in?’ and I said yes, at least I do something [...] I completed the course, a super easy course, we had a great time [young Roma woman]

This young woman took a recent course (just before the Covid pandemic) and driven by her aspirations and with the guidance of the mediator, she was able to do an internship in a care centre for people with mental disabilities. This was her dream.

It was time to do the internship and while the others went to Esplais [community centres] and school dining rooms, I spoke with María and told her, “Look for a special centre for me to see if there is any”, “yes, okay”. And she came and said to me: “do you know the X? Well, it is a special centre that is here next door and stuff. I did, that is, I called there, I did the interview... they said ‘yes’. [young Roma woman]

This example describes well the mediator role as an information facilitator, which of course could offer any other non-Roma technician who is present, accessible and achieves a good level of trust

to attend people on the street. On the other hand, the same young Roma woman comments on an important aspect:

Before it was only María or someone from the Esplai [community centre], or from the school that informed us. But now since we have the contact of Z [the course trainer], we can ask her and she provides us with a lot of information. [...] Whatever she has, she tells me. She also runs an association of Roma women who study. So every time now and then, she tells me: we are going to do this, we are going to do that, on such day, I don't know what [young Roma woman]

Since the end of the training course this non-Roma trainer managed to maintain a trustful relationship with the young women who participated. The latter comment demonstrates the importance of non-Roma agents, outside the neighbourhood, who can replace the mediator in some of her functions, and even precisely because she is an outsider, she can give access to a wider variety of resources, contacts, opportunities.

The mediator does not only link young people with public entities, but also refers people to the office of a pro-Roma NGO (in a neighbouring city, two train stops away) to register for training, guidance or job placement programmes.

Yes, it was María who told me that I had to do something, [...] yes, yes, all the guys that were referred to job placement by that [NGO] [...] several of us entered [got contracted], three or four entered and they went well. I remember I wasn't selected, but a lot of the other guy who did the training, were. [young Roma man]

Apart from her institutional role, her operation is based on informal ties with the people of the neighbourhood. For many, access to the various public services is to go to “María’s office”. Nevertheless, her influence is varied among the people: for some it opens a broader horizon, for others it remains a link (as a gate keeper) to the ‘Payo’ [non-Roma] world of training and employment.

Finally, María, due to her long experience in the neighbourhood, is widely known both by administrations and institutions, as well as by Catalan Roma civil society. A fact that obliges him to occupy the role of representative of the Roma people in general, and of the Roma community of R (city) in particular.

To sum up, I have observed that the Roma intercultural mediator has been highly effective in various roles:

1. A role model of social mobility for her family and for her local community;
2. Detecting the needs of different sectors of the district Roma population and responsible for seeking and allocating public resources to them;
3. A facilitator of opportunities or bridge between administration and community;
4. A facilitator of information with respect to the labour market, training, mobility, and other resources;
5. A promoter of social capital through actions that broaden people’s network of reference, towards people and organisations outside the territory, beyond the reach and knowledge of it.

6. A formal and informal representative of the Roma people in meetings, acts and official and informal events both with regards to institutions and organisations, and towards Roma civil society.

"THERE'S REALLY NOTHING MORE I CAN DO..." - CHALLENGES OF MEDIATION

Once the merits of mediation are detailed, now I turn to its challenging aspects. I have already commented that María, the mediator, works in a relatively small geographic area, which hosts the largest Roma community in the city. However, other communities live dispersed in other districts. According to María, she has very limited contacts to other Roma families, outside of her territory of reference, and her mediation cannot cover the whole city.

It's only me for all R [city]. There are neighbourhoods that I know, but many I don't. It is impossible for me to reach all the neighbourhoods and the communities.

In this regard, what is paradoxical is that the City Council technicians have her in mind as the referent person in any issues regarding the Roma. María makes it clear that her main asset as a mediator is her good knowledge of the Roma community's ethno-cultural idiosyncrasy, and the trust she has with them. In other neighbourhoods there are no official mediators, even if they have people of reference. María says that all the information she receives is passed on to Social Services of other neighbourhoods, however the transfer does not seem successful for Roma people. A Roma woman, an informal mediator from another neighbourhood regretted – in an informal conversation –, that opportunities do not appear in her territory, that nobody keeps them informed.

If there were referents in the neighbourhoods, the information would flow much more
[María, mediator]

In María's district, apart from her there are other referents with a successful educational-professional trajectory, and who also serve as a source of information and facilitators of opportunities because of their work position: two young men work at an influential Roma NGO, and one young man has been contracted as a school mediator first by Comprehensive Roma Plan, then by the city council. In the light of this fact, I can state that María's extended family is rich in social capital, and its agency would probably function as well without the mediation project. Their position is disproportionately stronger than that of other Roma families in other districts of the city. In this sense, the key intervention with Roma people of the city, is located in the zone that is currently best provided by social capital. This fact that may not reflect the situation of earlier decades, though.

Another critical aspect of María's professional role as a mediator is her self-responsibility facing expectations and the wide range of obligations that her work implies, serving the entire local community in general (regardless of her ethnicity³) and particularly the Roma community.

3 She must devote a certain proportion of her work time to general issues of local Social Services

There's really nothing more I can do... I always have to be willing to go [to meetings, cultural acts, events, thematic work groups, etc.] [María, mediator]

As the only Roma reference person in the city, she feels obliged to attend all events, acts, trainings, meetings, workshops where she is invited as a representative of the city's community, as vaguely defined by the mediation project.

The oft highlighted objective of mediation is the "Promotion of access of the Roma population to all resources, goods and services, from the perspective of active participation in the itineraries of social integration". The concept of **participation** often comes up in conversations with city council technicians. One of their claims is that Roma young people do not participate in public affairs outside of their close circles: "only in their own business".

I tried to promote the idea, but we have never managed to get young people to make associations

With this lament María does not seem to occupy a critical position in front of the dominant discourse on the formal participation necessary for social integration. Despite the limited historical successes of organizing Roma associations (based on ethnicity) without a concrete mobilizing cause (Bereményi & Mirga, 2012; Mirga, 2011), María does not pretend to explain the origin of the resistance to this form of formal organisation to make decisions, represent interests and present demands towards other sectors of the society. Nor does she seem to defend non-formal spaces of participation, and community decision-making as legitimate ways to activate and motivate young people.

This contrasts with her opinion that with "people of Roma culture" it is necessary to work in a different way: a fact that even her colleagues in social services often find difficult to understand. As an example, she mentions the difficulty of working in mixed gender groups ("if there is a male presence, the girls are silent"), or that Roma celebrities are different from those of non-Roma. That is, she claims that the mediator has a knowledge of these values, customs and beliefs, drawing on which she claims to bring public benefits to the population.

Regarding empowerment of youth so that they can gain autonomy in using public resources, the response of the mediator is not encouraging:

If they are accompanied, they do go [e.g. to the public employment office], but the system of signing up for a visit and returning in a week's time does not work for them.

This is probably the case because for the mediation project service facilitation is a priority over pedagogical tasks. The very dynamics of the work can replace the objectives that require more investment of time in the background.

Well, I don't remember, I did it with María, I don't know if she went to the Y [an NGO] ...

In this sense, the mediator is a local community worker who brings closer, makes more flexible and simplifies remote services that are difficult for Roma young people to access. However, with this, inadvertently, she keeps Roma users out of the usual operation of services and institutions (educational-training, insertion, youth, etc.).

Finally, the mediator, in a context of trust, sometimes reproduces moralizing opinions of the majority society about: 1) the Roma family that receives the guaranteed income that diverts them from job opportunities; 2) the Roma family with little job aspiration is also not interested in their children's studies; 3) Roma people who tend to fall into victimhood to justify their failure or conflicts in employment; 4) Roma people who despite their poverty do not live an austere life.

...We are also falling a lot into these stories that it is not entirely real. Yes, there is racism, because there is a lot. But there is a part that you cannot come to tell me that I want to work, but from this hour to that hour, and I want to earn that much... well, you have to mould yourself to the conditions of the market [María, mediator]

Then you see them buying beer at the bar [where it is more expensive than in the supermarket] [María, mediator]

She institutionally belongs to Social Services, and her work is evaluated and monitored under this perspective by non-Roma technicians. So, in the development of her role as mediator, the influence of a “moral economy” of the mainstream society is inevitable.

In this way, what I have seen is that mediation programme has a clear, though varied influence on the school-to-work transition of the Roma young people in a specific district of the observed municipality. I have collected successful stories of STWT in this district, both in terms of lucrative self-employment and long-term contracts with public companies. These success stories developed well before the mediator began her professional career, though in better economic conditions. Her influence on some Roma people is comparable to the influence that two other previously mentioned Roma young people have on community members.

The mediator develops her work in a delicate position, where her legitimacy is fed by two opposite sources. On the one hand, her contractual link with public administrations, and on the other hand, her acceptance by the local Roma community. Her own experience of social mobility and acculturation, her socio-labour aspirations and knowledge of the institutions have allowed her to assimilate interpretations, ‘theoretical frameworks’ for detecting and solving problems that are closer to those of social services experts than those of many Roma families from the neighbourhood. This double dependence (or double link) is ideal for the mediation function, which in practice translates her into a double complicity: on the one hand, Social Services ask for interventions that are resolve problems with good results (for example, insertion in training courses or provision of scholarships), however the mid- or long-term positive outcome and impact of these interventions are not measured. On the other, community members demand proximity and facilitation of services, benefits and information, and not necessary in agreement with social services’ logic. Although both parties are satisfied with their mediation work, this does not seem to change the social status, and the unequal relationship between majority and minority. Also, observable inequalities within the local community, between extended or nuclear families does not seem to be deeply influenced by mediation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The intercultural / sociocultural mediation programme and particularly the intercultural mediator's performance with respect to the school-to-work transition requires a broader perspective. The mediation programme has as its ultimate goal the social integration of a social group to the dominant logics of thinking, feeling and acting, responding mainly to the demands of the neoliberal capitalist market (Kóczé, 2019). The programme defines its main point of intervention in the ethno-cultural idiosyncrasy of the target group, and it aims to mediate between mainstream and Roma cultures. From our analytical perspective, this thinking diverts attention from the structural mechanisms that underlie the development of socio-economic inequalities suffered by the Roma population, and particularly in the poor neighbourhoods of this city.

Neoliberal governance, instead of coercing people to act and think in the dominant direction, deploys technologies "at a distance" that adapt to contexts and generate the need in individuals to mould themselves, to work on themselves, to improve themselves, to adapt ways of feeling, thinking and acting. Through "technologies of the self" (Miller & Rose, 1990) they generate self-governed individuals, a disposition (Hilgers, 2013) to internalize external norms and practices. In the case study above, I have shown how María represents a positive referent, a role model that apart from understanding elements of local Roma culture, she gets a good job and becomes a good and useful citizen. Her way of thinking and acting represents the contrast between the traditional-community way and the modern-individual manner.

The double dependence and, at the same time, double complicity that is characteristic of the operation of the intercultural mediation project manages to subtly channel the expectations and logics of the public administration towards the Roma community in order to foster their "social integration". Another relevant aspect of her operation is her claim for self-responsibility that Roma people should take for their own social integration. At this point, mediation project represents a transfer of responsibility from the public administrations, and the majority society, for the management of the inherent inequalities of the economic system (which sustains it), to the community that suffers it (Juhila et al., 2017; Pyysiäinen et al., 2017). This "transfer of responsibility" and its professional and emotional costs are well symbolized by the mediator's feeling that "there's really nothing more" she can do, that "she cannot answer to all demands", that "she does not have the magic wand". One of the mediator's dilemmas, consciously or unconsciously, is to cross the fine line between transforming or empowering individuals. In other words, there is a paradoxical difference between calling to mould to the system (i.e. individually navigate among resources) or trying to also negotiate the terms of their social mobility with the majority society and public and private administrations and institutions, on a community basis.

I have observed that little attention has been focused on the effect (or impact) of mediation, and instead the fulfilment of the actions is quantified (client served, client accessed programmes, client

inserted in the workplace). This detail contributes to the requirement to activate people and social groups perceived as inactive, economically dependent, unmotivated for social mobility, politically disorganized and non-participating (van Baar, 2012). Through the intercultural mediation these aspects are aimed to mobilise or organise for a better self-management of the social integration. However, while the problems of the individuals are managed from their ethnic-cultural particularity, this intervention does not appear to take into account the structural origin of those problems. In this sense, it does not aim to embed mediation into broader policies of just redistribution of resources. Interethnic relations are presented as inherently problematic and not as a consequence of the inequalities historically present and answered by the minority (Vincze, 2012). Thus, mediation is aimed at the transformation of individuals from othered groups, into adaptable, active, formable and employable citizens who respond to the capitalist rationality (Dahlstedt & Tesfahuney, 2010), a management strategy that the literature identifies as “neoliberal governance of minorities” (van Baar, 2012) through technologies of the self.

In future explorations I aim to further develop another important aspect, that emerged from the interviews. At least partly, mediation results in de-politicisation and disempowerment of its target group. The role of the mediator in any project is highly political (Bereményi & Girós, 2021), since she actively participates in the definition and framing of the problem and the legitimisation of its solution. The mediators have got the ability to reproduce the broader institutional rationale within which they are contracted to intervene. In their role as role models, intercultural mediators transmit an image of “successful objects of change”, that have been capable of moulding themselves, working on themselves to improve themselves, and have shown an uncritical commitment to the objectives of the mediation project. In this way I can consider them as active agents of the neoliberal governance of minorities. While the achievement of certain educational levels (school graduate, vocational training, university degree, etc.) or job placement is uncritically considered as empowerment, the criteria according to which they are, should be critically reviewed. In many cases, although labour insertion increases the economic autonomy of a person or the family, it may also mean the reproduction of hierarchies of social position, ethnicity / race and gender (Miraftab, 2004).

An intercultural mediation project represents an enormous potentiality for the social transformation of a community and its social environment. Similarly, intercultural mediator is a valuable asset for both the community and the administration that contract her. However, if the project remains on the margins of the broader public policies, and ends up being managed by social services, it runs the risk that good intentions contribute to the reproduction of inequalities rather than their elimination. If the intercultural mediator acts as a lonely hero linked to social services, her potential to generate structural changes remains illusory, not to mention her chances to confront a wide range of unsolvable dilemmas.

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