Rafael Barreto de Castro

**School Engagement of Children
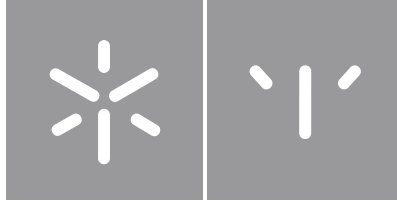From Roma Background:
A Qualitative Study**

Universidade do Minho
Escola de Psicologia

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**School Engagement of Children
from Roma Background:
A Qualitative Study**

Dissertação de Mestrado
em Psicologia da Educação

Trabalho efetuado sob a orientação do
Professor Doutor Pedro Sales Luís da Fonseca Rosário
e da **Doutora Tânia Marlene Teixeira Moreira**

junho de 2023

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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School Engagement de Crianças de Etnia Cigana:

Um Estudo Qualitativo

RESUMO

Estudos recentes sobre o progresso escolar de alunos de etnia cigana têm relacionado o seu insucesso a um baixo *school engagement*. Com o objetivo de compreender as trajetórias de *school engagement* de alunos do 5.º e 6.º ano, este estudo explora os padrões de envolvimento emocional, comportamental e cognitivo ao longo do ano letivo, bem como os mecanismos que os sustentam. Participaram treze crianças com idades entre dez e catorze anos. Os dados qualitativos foram recolhidos por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas, realizadas no início e fim do ano letivo. As entrevistas foram analisadas tematicamente, e os resultados apresentados em duas secções: I) Trajetórias de *school engagement* e II) Mecanismos de funcionamento destas trajetórias. De forma geral, os resultados sugerem um maior envolvimento com os pares do mesmo grupo étnico e com a escola, e um menor envolvimento com atividades relacionadas à aprendizagem. Ao longo do ano, os dados indicam uma trajetória decrescente em relação à qualidade da relação professor-aluno *(emotional engagement)*, frequência escolar *(behavioral engagement)*, e apoio à aprendizagem em casa *(cognitive engagement)*. Tais resultados parecem estar relacionados com a instrumentalidade limitada da utilidade percebida da escola (literacia e numeracia) e o baixo capital cultural, estando os objetivos de vida circunscritos às trajetórias tradicionais da cultura cigana.

Palavras-chave: aculturação, alunos ciganos, *school engagement*, utilidade da escola.

School Engagement of Children from Roma Background:

A Qualitative Study

ABSTRACT

Recent studies on the academic progress of students from Roma ethnic backgrounds have linked their underachievement to low school engagement. To gain a deep understanding of school engagement trajectories among 5th- and 6th-grade students, the present study explores patterns of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement throughout the academic year, as well as the mechanisms that sustain these patterns. Thirteen children aged between ten and fourteen years old participated in this study. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted at the beginning and end of the school year. The interviews were thematically analyzed, and the results were presented in two sections: I) School engagement trajectories and II) Inner workings of school engagement trajectories. Overall, the results indicate greater involvement with peers from the same ethnic group and with the school itself, while displaying low engagement in activities related to learning. Over the school year, data indicate a decreasing trajectory for the quality of the teacher-student relationship (emotional engagement), school attendance (behavioral engagement), and support for learning at home (cognitive engagement). These findings appear to be related to the limited perceived utility of school (basic literacy and numeracy) and the lack of cultural capital. The traditional trajectories of Roma culture constrained life goals.

Keywords: acculturation, Roma students, school engagement, utility value of school.

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LIST OF ABREVIATIONS

DGEEC – Directorate-General for Education and Science Statistics *(Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência)*

FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

SE – School Engagement

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School Engagement of Children from Roma Background: A Qualitative Study

[If you had the opportunity to build a school that all children would like, what would that school be like?] *I would have to ask what they wanted." (David, T2)*

"Roma" is the term used to characterize a set of heterogenous groups, including those who identify themselves as Gypsies, similar in their ancestry but holding with significant variations in their cultural practices, languages, and historical experiences. Over the centuries, the presence of Roma communities can be identified in almost all European Union member states, making up an essential part of the continent's history (Council of Europe, 2020a).

The historical narrative of Roma communities is deeply intertwined with experiences of discrimination, assimilation, deportation, and genocide. As a result, the European Union launched policies designed to safeguard the human rights of these populations (Council of Europe, 2020a).

According to the Council of Europe (2020a), there are between 10 and 12 million individuals from Roma groups in Europe. Despite the heterogeneity and the diverse contexts in which they live, they encounter similar challenges and difficulties in their everyday lives. The key challenges hindering the social inclusion of Roma groups include low educational attainment, high unemployment rates, and reduced or limited access to essential services such as housing. These obstacles significantly impact the overall well-being and opportunities for participation in public or political life (Council of Europe, 2020a). For example, it is well-accepted that education plays a pivotal role in the overall development of societies (Rosário et al., 2020), catalyzing expanding opportunities in the individual's life (Council of Europe, 2020b). However, students from Roma groups face various obstacles and barriers affecting their access to and success in formal education. Official reports indicate that children from Roma communities lag behind their non-Roma peers in academic performance (FRA, 2016). Despite the political and economic investment made to close this achievement gap, results fall short of the expected outcomes regarding attendance rates and school engagement (Casa-Nova et al., 2022; Council of Europe, 2020b; Frazer & Marlier, 2011). Portuguese data for the Roma groups show that global rates of school achievement increased considerably between the 2016/17 and 2018/19 school years, growing from 56% to 76.4% in elementary school and from 64% to 75.4% in high school (Casa-Nova et al., 2022). The opposite trend was seen for school dropouts. At elementary school, this index increased from 5.9% (2016/17) to 8% (2018/19), and in high school, from 5.6% (2016/17) to 11.9% (2018/19) (Casa-Nova et al., 2022). Importantly, just 3% of young people from Roma groups attend high school,

and 62% of the youth from Roma groups aged between 16 and 24 are not enrolled in any education, employment, or training (Direção-Geral de Estatísticas da Educação e Ciência [DGEEC], 2019).

The causes underlying this phenomenon are hard to nail down. Previous research has identified the following risk factors: cultural values, social organization, and gender roles (Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018). However, some authors (e.g., Hamilton, 2018) have criticized this approach as overly simplistic and potentially stigmatizing, likely to perpetuate exclusion (Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018). Children from Roma groups face various challenges and difficulties to fit in mainstream school systems as they must navigate between their heritage and mainstream cultures (Kraus, 2012; Wilding, 2008). Caught between two cultures, students from Roma groups may struggle to find a sense of belonging and identity in the school environment and achieve academic success. The predictive power of school engagement in academic success makes it a crucial mechanism for supporting the educational success and well-being of students from Roma groups.

Nonetheless, few studies are addressing school engagement in Roma communities (P. A. S. Moreira et al., 2022; T. Moreira et al., 2023; Rosário et al., 2016, 2017); and to our knowledge, fewer are taking a two-wave qualitative approach to this phenomenon. The current study followed a two-wave qualitative study to investigate and further understand the trajectories of school engagement over a school year in students from Roma groups attending 5th and 6th grades. We aim to better understand the persistent hidden and actual school dropout and underachievement characterizing students with Roma backgrounds while contributing to redesigning policies and interventions to improve the engagement of Roma groups in education.

Acculturation Paradigm

Marginalized ethnic groups such as Roma face constant challenges while interacting with mainstream culture. Acculturation is a dynamic process unfolding in the continuous contact between two or more cultural groups (Berry, 1997). This process results in various behavioral changes, attitudes, values, and identities (Berry, 2005; Makarova & Birman, 2015). Berry (2005) describes four categories of acculturation: marginalization (weak orientation toward both cultures), separation (strong orientation toward the inherited culture), assimilation (strong orientation toward the settlement culture), and integration (strong orientation to both cultures). While influenced by micro and macro-level contexts (Ward & Geeraert, 2016), this complex process begins in the first years of life, primarily within influential contexts, such as family and school (Makarova, 2019).

For many ethnic groups, the school is an essential source of intercultural contact (Ward & Geeraert, 2016). However, acculturation within schools can pose additional difficulties and challenges

to engagement in and with schools for students from marginalized ethnic groups. For instance, students from ethnic-cultural groups perceiving high pressure and attitudes of prejudice and exclusion from their peers are likely to feel discouraged from engaging and participating in social systems such as school (Ward & Geeraert, 2016).

School Engagement

The concept of School Engagement (SE) has gained prominence in the field of educational psychology. According to Fredricks et al. (2016), SE is strongly and positively related to school performance and success and to student's physical and psychological well-being. Prior research has shown that student engagement is key to preventing school dropout (Pino-James et al., 2019).

SE refers to students' active participation and involvement in school activities, including classes, projects, and extracurricular activities. It is a complex construct that seeks to understand how students feel, act, and think (Azevedo, Rosário, Núñez, et al., 2023), and is a critical factor in students' academic and personal success. Fredricks et al. (2004) defined SE as comprising three interrelated dimensions: emotional, behavioral, and cognitive. The emotional dimension refers to students' positive feelings toward people in the school community as well as students' emotional bond with the school, including the feeling of belonging and satisfaction. The behavioral dimension includes the active participation of students in school activities, such as attending classes, doing homework, and participating in extracurricular activities. Finally, the cognitive dimension refers to the student's attention, interest, and effort in learning, encompassing a set of cognitive strategies used to improve their learning processes. Students who engage cognitively in school tend to use effective cognitive strategies, likely to improve their school success (for an overview, see Figure 1).

Under the lens of a social-cognitive perspective, SE must also be understood as an outcome of the individual's interaction with the environment and its responsiveness to contextual variations. Therefore, parental and community involvement, as well as classroom and school environments, are critical to SE and, consequently, to student school success (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012). The way students establish interpersonal relationships in the school environment, respond to school expectations and participate in school activities, and perceive their learning processes is likely to impact their' SE patterns. In addition, the perceived utility beliefs of school and learning are variables closely tied to SE, as students who understand school as valuable and relevant tend to show high effort, persistence, and active involvement in academic activities (Harackiewicz et al., 2016). The perceived utility value of school refers to an individual's perception of the importance and relevance of school to help them achieve personal goals (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), such as knowledge acquisition, better job

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Figure 1

Three School Engagement Dimensions

Dimensions	Examples
Emotional *Toward individuals and the school*	• Peer and teacher relationships • Liking school and favorite activities
Behavioral *Participation in school activities*	• Attendance and punctuality • Compliance with school rules and expectations • Participation in non-curricular activities
Cognitive *Engagement in learning*	• Help-seeking • Self-observation • Planning • Self-evaluation • Review • Self-reaction

*(All contained under: **School Engagement**)*

opportunities, social advancement, and personal success. The utility value of education can be influenced by individual factors like cultural values, prior experiences, family expectations, and the socioeconomic context, as well as contextual factors such as the quality of the education (Wang & Eccles, 2013) or the teachers approaches to teaching (Rosário, Núñez, Ferrando, et al., 2013; Rosário, Núñez, Valle, et al., 2013). For Roma children, who are often exposed to acculturative hassles and challenges such as discrimination, segregation, and socioeconomic barriers, these factors can shape their perception of school utility values and, consequently, impact their autonomy and SE trajectories (T. Moreira et al., 2023).

Drawing on the theoretical framework presented, this qualitative study explores the SE patterns of 5th- and 6th-grade students with Roma background over a school year. The findings are expected to enable us to build a more nuanced portrait of the developmental trajectories of SE and gain insights into underlying mechanisms supporting the three dimensions of SE in lower elementary school students. As claimed by (Stenroos & Helakorpi, 2021), it is crucial to explore the motivational drivers to attend and pursue school beyond elementary education among students with Roma backgrounds. While focusing on the SE of Roma children, we can envision some strategies that could promote an inclusive and quality education, considering their unique cultural and contextual circumstances, thus mitigating the risks of social exclusion and poverty that they may face (Rosário et al., 2014). Moreover, data can help

to identify potential barriers and challenges they face, which is useful to inform the development of targeted interventions and support systems to enhance students' school experiences.

The Present Study

Findings from various surveys conducted in the European Union (Council of Europe, 2020b) reveal a significant disparity between Roma and non-Roma children, with the former consistently falling behind in educational achievements. This is a worrying scenario because education is the primary mechanism for addressing marginalization and social exclusion shaping directly an individual's life opportunities (Hamilton, 2018). While school attendance is mandatory, fostering students' engagement in education is crucial for young individuals to ensure they fully benefit from the educational experience and develop the necessary skills to thrive in today's competitive world (Azevedo, Rosário, Magalhães, et al., 2023). Extant research has shown that SE plays a vital role in promoting learning and academic persistence, and success (Fredricks et al., 2004; Pino-James et al., 2019).

This study is part of a broader project but uses a unique data set and research focus. Concretely, intends to contribute to the literature by examining the trajectories of SE over a school year through the voices of 5th- and 6th-grade students from Roma groups. Grounded on acculturation and school engagement frameworks and using a multiple case study design, this study draws on two waves of data to understand the trajectories of SE with and at school and the inner workings supporting their patterns of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement. Despite the considerable efforts made by European policies and research to favor successful school transitions of students with Roma background beyond compulsory education, the outcomes are modest (e.g., high early dropout and absenteeism rates and persistent high underachievement) (Mendes & Magano, 2021). The 5th and 6th grades were chosen because they represent the first school transition in the Portuguese educational system (from elementary to middle school). During this transition, students face changes related to the teaching methods, curriculum content, academic expectations, and social dynamics, which are likely to impact students' SE and academic performance. Furthermore, at this educational level, students have typically acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills which are highly valued within the Roma community due to their utility to follow an independent path (e.g., getting a driving license, preparing to marry, or working in a fair selling clothing). These reasons may lead to a decrease in the motivation and willingness of the Roma people to engage in school and learning at middle school, as the perceived relevance of education may diminish. We believe that findings can point out paths that may inform schools in their efforts to promote the academic success of children from Roma groups. The knowledge produced is also expected to help policymakers, education professionals, and stakeholders define

strategies and make effective decisions to promote the inclusion and academic success of students from Roma communities.

Context

This study was conducted in two purposefully selected public middle schools in deprived areas in different cities in northern Portugal. These schools were chosen because of the high number and heterogeneity of Roma students enrolled. Despite being perceived as homogeneous, Roma groups in Portugal differ in their cultural traditions and values, economic activities, and housing. The two selected schools include families from three main Roma communities: the first group comprises individuals settled in social housing and has the sale of clothing at fairs as its leading economic activity; individuals belonging to the second group can also be settled in social housing, and typically sell toys and balloons in traditional and popular fairs; while the third group comprises individuals living in camps with even fewer resources than those of the first two groups. Individuals in the third group practice subsistence agriculture and earn a living by selling scrap metal.

Method

Sample

The study was conducted in two schools located in deprived areas, aiming to capture different school environments and students' cultural dissimilarities. To ensure diversity within the target population, participants were recruited using an intentional sampling strategy (Robinson, 2014). A total of 17 students were randomly assigned to two groups and took part in the first interview at the begging of the school year. Four participants were unable to be reached for the second interview at the end of the school year due to reasons such as severe health issues and relocation. Therefore, a total of 13 Portuguese students from Roma groups attending the 5th and 6th grades were included in both data collection waves (see Table 1). Participants' ages ranged from 10 to 14 years, with five girls. Approximately 69% of these students experienced grade retention and repetition during their educational career.

Procedures

The research was conducted with the approval of the Scientific Ethics Committee of the Universidade do Minho and the Portuguese Ministry of Education. Initial contact was made with school directors, teachers, and social assistants to facilitate access to the children's parents/caregivers and obtain their informed consent. Parents/caregivers were invited to an individual in-person meeting at school, where the principal researcher provided all the information about the project: objectives, data collection, and procedure method. Individual informed consent was obtained from parents/caregivers who agreed to

Table 1

Participants

Participants[a]	Sex	Age		Grade	Number of grade retentions
		T1	T2		
			Group 1		
Adam	M	10	11	5th	0
Billy	M	12	12	6h	1
Carmen	F	10	10	5h	0
David	M	12	12	6h	0
Elena	F	14	14	6h	2
Freddy	M	11	11	5h	1
George	M	14	14	5h	4
Harry	M	12	12	5h	1
			Group 2		
Ian	M	11	11	5h	1
Joy	F	12	13	5h	2
Karl	M	10	10	5h	0
Livia	F	12	12	6h	1
Marian	F	13	13	6h	2

Note. $n = 13$.

[a] Pseudonyms.

their children's participation in the research. Additionally, the students themselves provided informed consent prior to participating in the study. It was emphasized that their involvement was completely voluntary and confidential, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. No incentives or financial compensation were provided to the participants. Two experienced investigators conducted the interviews in both groups.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to gain a deeper understanding of students' SE trajectories over the course of a school year. Data was collected at two different times points during the school year: at the beginning (T1 – September) and at the end of the same school year (T2 – June).

The interviews started with general information to establish a connection with the students and overcome distrust and cultural or linguistic barriers (Lyberg et al., 2014). Then, a set of open questions focused on participants' SE were asked. Sample questions include: "Who are the people you get along with best at school? And who do you like the least?"; "What do you like most about school? What do you like least?"; "How often do you attend school? What are the reasons for your absences?"; "How

important is school in your life? How can the school help you in your future?". In addition to the questions addressed in the first-wave script, the second-wave interview included a list of questions to understand the participants' school experiences during that school year. For example, "Another school year has come to an end. How was this school year for you? [How were your grades? Your behavior?]"; "During this year, have you thought about something you would like to do when you grow up a little more? How do you think your life will be?"; "Until when do you think you will continue to be enrolled in school? Why?"; "When you come home after school, what do you usually do before going to bed?" Question-wording was also adjusted to overcome language barriers, misunderstandings, and expression gaps as needed. All interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The analysis sought to identify themes and patterns of SE trajectories and the inner workings of those trajectories over a school year. Thematic content analysis was aided by the NVivo software, following the recursive process by Braun and Clarke (2012). Intra- and cross-case analyzes were performed, as well as intra and inter-moments, using a constant comparative method to map possible relationships. Demographic characteristics were considered in the analysis to capture potential influences on SE trajectories. Following a hybrid approach, deductive themes and categories were used in the codebook development. Then, following an inductive fashion, codes, and categories were added. The first author coded a total of 26 interviews. For each defined category or subcategory, the response frequency was reported based on the scoring scheme proposed by Cooper and Rodgers (2006), where 'all' indicated 100% of participants, 'nearly all' indicated 100% - 2 participants, 'most' indicated 50% + 1 to 100% - 2, 'around half' indicated 50% + 1 participants, 'some' indicated 3 to 50% + 1 participants, 'a couple' indicated 2 participants, and 'one' indicated one participant (see Table 2). Supporting quotes are included to illustrate themes and subthemes, provide a detailed description of participants' representations and experiences, and add validity to the results (Smith, 2017).

Findings

The results are presented in two sections: I) school engagement trajectories and II) inner workings of school engagement.

School Engagement Trajectories

SE was observed in its three dimensions: a) emotional, b) behavioral, and c) cognitive engagement over a school year. Data were compared across time moments (T1 and T2) and school grades to examine whether the findings were unique to this sample at this given time or represent a trajectory for SE.

Table 2

Frequency of responses

Frequency	Score scheme	Range of participants	
All	100%	12	13
Nearly all	100% - 2	11	
Most	50% + 1 to 100% - 2	8	10
Around half	50% + 1	6	7
Some	3 to 50% + 1	3	5
A couple	2	2	
One	1	1	

Note. *n* = 13.

Differences between the two waves will be reported whenever they exist; however, overall, no meaningful differences were found across school levels or even accounting for gender or age.

Emotional Dimension

The emotional dimension covers positive and negative experiences with classmates, teachers, and the school itself. The participants' speeches regarding the emotional dimension were grouped into three subcategories: (1) peer relationships; (2) student-teacher relationships, and (3) emotions toward school.

Peer-Relationships. All participants reported positive relationships with their peers. Notably, there is a lack of evidence of cross-cultural peer relationships. Overall, the reported peer relationships predominantly exist within the same cultural group or even within their own families. For example:

[Who are the people you get along with best at school?] *My cousins.* [Who are your cousins?] *The Gypsies.* [Are they all your cousins?] *Yes. (Harry, T2)*

Regarding negative relationships, most of the participants reported experiencing some form of inter-ethnic conflict in T1. At the end of the school year (T2), forms of inter-ethnic conflict were reported by approximately half of the participants. These conflicts and tensions varied from name-calling to physical aggression. It should be noted, though, that the reported cultural conflicts were related to mainstream culture and other ethnic groups (including those identifying themselves as Gypsies) that are perceived as not belonging to their own cultural community. This reflects the heterogeneity of the Roma groups.

[And who do you like least here at school?] *Those who skip classes. Then they make fun of people.* [And who are those?] *They say they are Gypsies.* [Are they or not?] *We call them*

Gitanos. [Why?] *I don't know.* [And why do they make fun of you?] *I don't know. (...) When we started at the other school it was always like that. (Karl, T2)*

Student-Teacher Relationships. Around half of the participants reported positive relationships with their teachers in both time moments. Although negative references have been captured in the T1, at the end of the school year, more references were found supporting negative relationships with teachers. The following supporting quotes illustrate the dichotomy of students' relationships with teachers.

[And how about the teachers? Which teacher do you like the most?] *I like English the most.* [Why?] *She helps me get better grades.* [How does she help you?] *She pushes me. (...) Sometimes I'm distracted, and the teacher helps me to be more focused. I am now more concentrated in class.* [And which teacher do you like least?] *The Math one. (...) She always scolds. (...) Everyone in class. (...) We go in and she's already there, and she says "All right! All right, you bunch of idiots". (...) She says things like that.* [And what do you think of that?] *It's bad.* [And does that always happen?] *Yes. (David, T1)*

Emotions Toward School. Regarding the emotions toward school in general, we found an increase in the number of participants who reported positive emotions over the school year. Data show that most of the participants in T1 and all of them in T2 reported positive emotions toward school. These references relate mainly to the school space and non-curricular activities. We also found negative emotions related to learning activities, such as classes and homework, that were expressed by around half of the interviews.

Ah, [I like the school] *when there are breaks, when I don't have classes, when the teacher is absent and gets substituted. (Marian, T1)*

Behavioral Dimension

The behavioral dimension reflects the idea of participation and involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities. In this dimension, we gathered all the references addressing student participation and grouped them into three subcategories: (1) attendance and punctuality; (2) compliance with school rules and expectations; and (3) participation in non-curricular activities.

Attendance and punctuality. The attendance of students to classes and their punctuality were classified as (a) regular – when students attend all the classes every day. Students only missed school for health reasons; and (b) irregular – when students declared missing school for reasons other than illness.

According to data, there was an increase in references related to irregular attendance over the school year. While most of the participants reported regular attendance in T1, at T2 most of them accounted for irregular attendance. The reasons for being absent ranged mostly from having to visit relatives (in their homes or hospitals) or helping parents with work activities (motives cultural related and extrinsic to their control) to being unwilling to attend school (motives controlled by the individual). Examples illustrating both regular and irregular attendance frequencies are provided below.

Oh, I never... sometimes I don't feel like it, but I must come. I'm too lazy to wake up, I'm warm, I don't feel like waking up. But it's mandatory. My mother peels me! I come. I must come. I always come. (Elena, T2)

Either because I'm sick, (...) or because I fall asleep, or because I don't feel like it. (Joy, T1)

Compliance With School Rules and Expectations. This subcategory reflects the participants' adherence to school rules and classroom attitudes, including students' behavior in class and yard, and homework completion. In this subcategory, responses were organized into (a) adjusted, when participants behave as expected in class and at the yard or refer to display positive class attitudes, such as willingness to complete homework, and (b) maladjusted, when participants mention behaviors and attitudes deviant from school norms and expectations. References to adjusted and maladjusted behaviors and attitudes were found in all the interviews at both moments. Still, it is worthy of note that in T2 all participants mentioned maladjusted behaviors in class, including talking, laughing, being distracted, disrupting the smooth running of the class, and disrespecting teachers and classmates.

I don't do what the teachers say, I don't work, I don't respect the teachers, I don't want to come to class, I stay in the playground, (...) I turn my back on the teachers and everything. (Joy, T1)

Moreover, comparing across time moments, there was a decrease in the number of participants who reported doing homework, from nearly all in T1 to most of them in T2. Reasons listed include lack of interest or enjoyment. Homework was perceived as boring and exhaustive, and students felt overwhelmed by the workload and perceived inability to perform homework as expected. For all these reasons, students reported to prefer engaging in leisure activities rather than completing homework.

[Do you usually study outside of school?] *I study at the study center.* [And do you only do homework or study too?] *We do homework and study. Then, in the end, we go to the*

computers. [When you don't go to the study center, do you usually study at home, do

homework at home?] *Yes. (Ian, T1)*

[What about homework?] *I never do.* [Why] *Because I play instead. (Ian, T2)*

Participation in Non-Curricular Activities. Refers to engagement in activities that take

place outside the classroom but in the school space. For this subcategory, we found positive references

in all the interviews at both time moments. Among the favorite and most mentioned activities are

playing soccer, playing on computers or cell phones, going to the cafeteria, eating, walking around the

school, and chatting with friends.

I play soccer, or I play on my cell phone. (Ian, T1)

I'm always playing with my colleagues. (Carmen, T2)

I'm always eating! (…) We walk around and that. (Livia, T1)

Cognitive Dimension

The cognitive dimension encompasses the notion of commitment, involving reflection and

willingness to exert effort in understanding intricate concepts and developing challenging skills. Within

this category, we selected a set of cognitive strategies matching the participants' discourse. The

following strategies were identified: (1) help-seeking; (2) planning; (3) review; (4) self-observation; (5)

self-evaluation, and (6) self-reaction.

Help-seeking. Refers to seek for assistance or help when performing tasks related to school

and learning. Such support was related to the following main contexts: (a) outside school, including

home or study centers, and (b) classroom. For each context, we gathered the participants' statements

into "yes" or "no".

Outside school, the number of participants who reported having support in their learning tasks

decreased from most of them in T1 to one in T2. The support was provided by professionals

(educators) at the study center and relatives at home (siblings, mothers, or fathers), as in the following

excerpt:

When it's hard for me, I call my sisters. But then I do it myself. (Marian, T1)

It is worthy of note that around half of the participants claimed to receive no support. The

predominant explanation was the family members' low literacy, which hindered their ability and

openness to provide support.

Because I sometimes ask my mother, and my mother doesn't know [cannot explain the school

content] *because she only studied until the sixth grade. (Carmen, T1)*

In the classroom, some of them mentioned seeking help in T1, but only one participant pointed out this learning strategy in T2. Teachers were referred as the main source of support.

[When you have a question about homework, what do you do?] *I ask the teacher. (George, T1)*

Planning. This subcategory covers planning, sequencing, timing, and completing activities toward a self-set goal. This strategy was identified in some cases in relation to exam preparation, but also daily study routines.

I go to the notebook to see what I have: Math. I take the notebook and the book, I see in the notebook if I have written down the homework, then I do it. Then I put it away and put it in my backpack. Sometimes I have a test, I'll have to study a little more. I study for an hour, an hour and a half, make revisions, close the book, check if it's right, do the exercises and that's it. I save it, do my homework, and put it in the book. Then I wake up in the morning, my mother makes me a snack, and I put it in my backpack. And I go to school. (Elena, T2)

Review. Statements showing efforts made by students to review their notes, tests, or textbooks to prepare themselves for class or future assessments. This strategy was captured in some participants' interviews in relation to exam preparation.

Oh, I put the book and the notebook, I put a sheet next to it. And I see what's in the book and in the notebook, I go to previous classes... And I see what's written there. Then I take a sheet and write what's there. (Marian, T1)

Self-observation. Judgments on one's functioning and behaviors regarding the learning processes. This strategy was identified in the interviews of all participants in both time moments and was mainly related to behavior, attention, willingness to study, abilities and difficulties, and effort. Examples include:

Because I don't study. Because I play instead. (...) I'm talking a lot in class. That I never do homework. I never study. (Ian, T2)

Self-evaluation. Judgments on one's functioning and behaviors toward an academic goal. The number of participants who mentioned this strategy increased from around half in T1 to all in T2. The exercise of self-evaluation appeared to be related mainly to the need to study more time, pay more attention, participate and engage more in classes, try harder and do the homework, improve attendance, and adjust their behavior to reach better grades.

Why is it important to be smart? (...) To always get 100% on the tests, I wish. There's a girl who always do it, she's always in the nineties [percentage], in the hundred [percentage]. [She is]

Smarter. Intelligent. [What do you need to be more intelligent and smarter like that?] *Study, pay attention. (Billy, T2)*

Self-reaction. Concrete actions to adjust behaviors toward an academic goal. Over time, there was an increase in the number of cases mentioning this strategy. While this strategy was identified in some cases at the beginning of the year, at the end, around half participants did elaborate on concrete actions to adjust their behavior for the next school year. Themes were related to changes in the environment to avoid distractors and promote attention, after-school routines to increase study time, and the quality of their efforts in class and learning tasks. For instance:

I always got to the classroom, and then I saw kids playing soccer... and I opened the curtain and saw and [got distracted]*... now I don't see it, I don't open the curtain anymore. Now it's... I study and look at the board. (Freddy, T2)*

Inner workings of SE Trajectories

The data presented substantial evidence of fluctuations in SE throughout the school year, notwithstanding the consistently low levels observed in both time moments. This section explores potential mechanisms underlying the trajectories of SE for students from Roma backgrounds and preventing a meaningful engagement with learning and school. Two main themes emerged in this section: a) utility value beliefs; b) autonomy.

Education Value Beliefs

Participants' beliefs on the perceived value of education were explored as a mechanism underlying the students' engagement trajectories. Participants' beliefs on the utility value of school and formal education were coded regarding the motivation to approach positive consequences or avoid negative consequences, including (1) mastering literacy and numeracy skills to improve living conditions; (2) opening future life opportunities; (3) improving social and cultural capital; and (4) avoiding family disintegration and loss of social allowances.

Mastering Literacy and Numeracy Skills to Improve Living Conditions. All participants in both time moments acknowledged the instrumental value of education. Education provides essential literacy and numeracy skills to achieve specific goals related to daily routines, such as the ability to read a letter from the school or the city council and sign a contract to a paid job, manage money, or get a driving license. Moreover, some participants expressed a sense of empowerment through mastering fundamental literacy skills, as they feel capable of teaching their parents who lack such skills.

In a few years, knowing how to read, knowing how to explain to my children. Knowing how to read. Because I started reading at school, I started writing at school, I think that's it. (Livia, T1)

To know how to read and write to get a driver's license. To go to school [then] *to teach my parents. (Ian, T1)*

Opening Future Life Opportunities. Comparing both time moments, there is an increase in the number of participants (half of the participants in T1 to nearly all in T2) valuing education as a gateway to paid jobs and, therefore, a "future". The following quotation illustrates this instrumental perspective.

It is for us to study, then to have a job. A future. Because it helps us to have a future. (Carmen, T1)

Improve Social and Cultural Capital. Overall, interviews suggest that social and mainstream cultural capital is not acquired within the family sphere. In the initial data collection (T1), approximately half of the participants highlighted education's value in this aspect; however, at the end of the school year (T2), only some participants referred to education as a tool to acquire social and cultural capital. The topics mentioned predominantly revolve around acquiring social skills, including appropriate behavior and effective communication. Additionally, some participants emphasized the importance of developing attentiveness and fulfilling commitments even in the absence of personal motivation.

As a man has the right to know about women, girls also have the right to know about men [physiological differences between sexes]*. (Elena, T1)*

To learn to read, and to know how to be. [How to be? With other people?] *Yes. With friends. Learn to speak too.* [Do you think the school teaches how to speak?] *Not to speak... but to talk to people. (Marian, T1)*

Avoiding Family Disintegration and Loss of Social Allowances. The motivations underlying regular attendance to school are mostly focused on avoiding governmental sanctions, such as losing social allowances or being placed in residential care institutions. When comparing moments, this perspective is emphasized in T2 by most participants and only a couple in T1.

(If I don't go to school) The social worker will come after me. And then I'll be taken from home. That's it, it's not worth saying. (Joy, T2)

Autonomy

This category codes the participant's perceived autonomy over certain aspects of one's life and decision-making at (1) home and (2) school.

Home. It expresses the perceived autonomy of the participants regarding activities and decision-making at home. It was possible to identify high functional autonomy in the interviews of all participants at both time moments.

[Who decides what time to go to sleep?] *I choose the time. (Billy, T2)*

I get up every day at six to wake up my father and mother, then I go to bed and wake up at seven. (David, T2)

School. This subcategory includes references targeting participants' perceived autonomy in activities and decision-making regarding school and learning. Throughout the school year, quotes reflecting low autonomy in school were detected in around half of the interviews in T1 and in most of them in T2.

[But if you say at home "I don't feel like going to school" what do you think will happen?] *My mother will make me. (Ian, T2)*

[How long do you think you'll be in school for?] *I don't know. If I behave well, I'll stay until the end. [And when does school end?] I don't know.* [You must go to school until when?] *Seventeen, right?* [It's mandatory until you're eighteen] *Eighteen.* [Will you go to school until you're required to?] *Yes.* [Why do you think they make you go to school?] *Because it's the law. (Joy, T2)*

Discussion

School Engagement Trajectories

Participants' trajectories of SE differ across dimensions. However, a more detailed examination of the trajectories requires a deeper exploration of specific indicators within each dimension. By doing so, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the variations between the results obtained at both time points (T1 and T2). The emotional dimension emerged as the most prominent and exhibited the most favorable outcomes, followed by the behavioral and cognitive dimensions. While comparing the results obtained in the two moments, the key findings of this study indicate that no meaningful changes were observed in emotional engagement over time, except for the references to the teacher-student relationship, which declined from the beginning to the end of the school year. The relationships with peers and the school were described as positive and improved over time. Previous research has consistently shown a positive correlation between strong peer relationships and higher levels of emotional engagement, as well as positive school outcomes (Ladd et al., 1996; Liu et al., 2023; Wang & Eccles, 2012). However, it is important to note that these relationships primarily occur within the ethnic-cultural group, which may indicate a potential sign of separation rather than integration. Societal

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pressure for assimilation can contribute to this separation, as marginalized ethnic groups may develop strategies of isolation (Rumbaut, 2008; Ward & Geeraert, 2016). Importantly, the feedback cycle of separation can hinder efforts toward inclusion. Therefore, while positive relationships within the same cultural group promote SE by strengthening ties, they may also prevent individuals from developing the cultural capital required to participate in the mainstream culture (T. Moreira, Rosário, Azevedo, et al., 2022; Ward & Geeraert, 2016). Moreover, the reported decline in the perceived quality of teacher-student relationships can act as a risk factor for the school adjustment of ethnic minority students (Makarova et al., 2023). As supported in previous findings, positive teacher-student relationships play a crucial role in student engagement while providing the creation of a supportive learning environment, encouraging active participation, and expanding students' beliefs on the utility value of education for future endeavors (Makarova, 2019; T. Moreira, Rosário, Azevedo, et al., 2022). The strong relationships with peers and high engagement in social interactions contrasted with less supportive relationships with teachers and limited involvement in learning activities. This educational scenario suggests a potential path toward disengagement within the school system (T. Moreira, Rosário, Azevedo, et al., 2022).

Regarding the behavioral dimension, data noted a noticeable deterioration of this dimension over time, particularly concerning school attendance. This decreasing trend is consistent with previous findings (Rosário et al., 2017). The deterioration in the behavioral indicators suggests that students from the Roma community struggle to maintain long-term adherence to school rules and expectations. This information is not new, but it is a data-grounded opportunity to emphasize the need to set culturally sensitive interventions to train self-regulation skills while helping these students focus on their learning tasks and improve their learning skills (Cerezo et al., 2019; Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012; T. Moreira, Rosário, Martins, et al., 2022; Zimmerman, 1989).

An interesting data is that the cognitive dimension was little addressed in the students' narratives. This finding merits educators' and researchers' particular attention because low mastery and inadequate support make it challenging to sustain SE over time, particularly for students struggling to learn (Rosário et al., 2017). In general, self-observation emerged as the most prominent cognitive strategy in both waves. On the other hand, strategies such as planning and reviewing remained relatively stable throughout the school year. It is crucial to acknowledge that the predominance of self-observation and the limited mention of deep cognitive strategies (e.g., (re)elaboration of information, attentional focus control, mental rehearsal of positive statements) suggest that students may rely predominantly on superficial learning strategies rather than deeper ones that promote deep understanding and adaptable knowledge application (Fredricks et al., 2004; Valle et al., 2016).

Although some progress was observed in the development of deeper strategies like self-evaluation, and self-reaction over the school year, the limited reported use of these strategies seems to hinder positive outcomes of cognitive engagement. For example, self-assessment involves not only observation but also the establishment of goals and a comparison between expected achieved outcomes. Research has demonstrated that general goals such as 'do my best' do not enhance motivation or learning due to their lack of specificity (Zimmerman, 1989). Goals need to be well-defined, perceived as attainable, and measurable; importantly, current reports did not refer to goals but rather good intentions or vague pursuits. Interestingly, an increasing number of participants mentioned utilizing this strategy in the two waves. In turn, self-reaction, despite some improvement, remained relatively low. This could be attributed to its requirement for self-regulatory competencies such as persistence, metacognitive strategies, and high levels of motivation and agency.

Inner Workings of SE Trajectories

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the inner workings of SE trajectories of 5th and 6th-grade students, we explored the motivational drivers related to the utility value of school and autonomy. According to previous studies (T. Moreira et al., 2023; T. Moreira, Rosário, Azevedo, et al., 2022), current findings suggest that school and formal education were perceived as a tools to approach positive outcomes (e.g., mastering literacy and numeracy skills to improve living conditions, open future life opportunities, and improve social and cultural capital) and to avoid negative consequences related to the loss of social assistance benefits and family disintegration.

The instrumental purposes assigned to education affect students' motivation and their engagement in and with school and learning, along with their transitions beyond compulsory education (T. Moreira, Rosário, Martins, et al., 2022). The decreasing trajectories of SE may be shaped by the perception that primarily instrumental purposes of mastering reading, writing, and basic arithmetic are already fulfilled at this point in the school (Rosário et al., 2016). The limited academic socialization practices at home (Khattab, 2015), and the strong connection with their own ethnic-cultural group peers are potential factors contributing to the persistent poor trajectories of SE and academic underachievement observed among children from Roma groups (Edwards & McClintock, 2018; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Consequently, children and youth with Roma backgrounds are likely to follow "traditional" paths and set goals not aligned with mainstream educational values and expectations (Hamilton, 2018; T. Moreira, Rosário, Azevedo, et al., 2022). Existing research (e.g., Makarova, 2019; Teuscher & Makarova, 2018) has consistently highlighted the correlation between students cultivating supportive relationships, particularly with teachers and inter-ethnic group peers, and experiencing

positive school acculturation processes and outcomes, including the perceived utility value of school and SE. Furthermore, it is important to discuss the persistent nature of the purposes attributed to school and education, which seems to remain consistent over time and across different school levels. This evidence suggests that the school experiences of these children may be limited in their opportunities to expand perspectives on the utility values of education and foster the development of academic goals and expectations (T. Moreira, Rosário, Azevedo, et al., 2022).

Extensive research has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of goal setting in addressing declining engagement (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2019; Martin et al., 2022) while fostering self-regulation processes, engagement, performance, and achievement (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). In the current findings, students point out future directions related to educational trajectories. However, these goals lack specificity and clear progression. Therefore, the findings on future life opportunities align with previous research, emphasizing the significance of familial ties and informal self-employment opportunities (Hamilton, 2018). As suggested by T. Moreira, Rosário, Martins, et al. (2022), the absence of defined purposes and aspirations for the future can potentially contribute to academic underachievement among both minority and non-minority students.

It is also important to consider that perspectives on the future are significantly influenced by socializing agents within the family and school environment, including parents and teachers (T. Moreira, Rosário, Azevedo, et al., 2022). As supported in previous studies (Bereményi & Carrasco, 2015; T. Moreira et al., 2023), teachers and non-Roma peers are crucial agents of socialization regarding the cultural capital needed to adjust and progress in formal education systems. Given the low engagement with teachers and non-Roma peers, goal-setting and social mobility aspirations are largely shaped by traditional paths. Moreover, the low literacy regarding the inner workings of the school system reflected in narratives may be a risk factor in establishing well-defined goals and orienting themselves to academic continuity.

Along with the increase in references to school attendance as a tool to prevent negative consequences over the school year, findings suggest that SE is mostly extrinsically motivated and regulated. In fact, as supported in previous studies (e.g., Pino-James et al., 2019), students lack autonomy in the school context regarding the decision-making on the extent of their engagement in learning and enrolment in the school system. However, it is worthy of note that the lack of autonomy is circumscribed to the school and learning activities, as students express high levels of autonomy over certain aspects of their lives at home.

The decline in SE trajectories over the school year and in the early stages of their school paths could be a symptom of a hidden dropout (Guay et al., 2010). Overall, these factors appear to have a meaningful impact on students' SE. Without clear objectives or the cultural capital needed to achieve their goals, it becomes challenging for students to understand how the school can support them in their pursuits and, consequently, to engage with and in the school system. Additionally, the cultural goals prevalent in a context where formal education holds limited utility may lead students to perceive that the costs of pursuing education outweigh the benefits.

Limitations and Further Research

Along with the insightful contributions to the literature, it is important to acknowledge some limitations of this research. First, the reliance on a single source of data and data collection method could prevent us from learning significant mechanisms (e.g., the role of multiple stakeholders) supporting the SE trajectories of students from Roma backgrounds. Moreover, assessing SE trajectories through questions that require substantial cognitive reflection may pose challenges and potentially lead to inaccuracies in data. Second, the relatively small sample in this study can make it difficult to capture the heterogeneity of characteristics and realities of students from Roma groups. Therefore, readers need to acknowledge that findings are not necessarily illustrative of other groups, even within the Roma community, or educational contexts. Third, a significant limitation of the qualitative analysis was the absence of a second coder. The second coder would enhance reliability and mitigate potential biases, and provide a more balanced and comprehensive analysis.

Further longitudinal research is needed to examine the SE trajectories and educational beliefs and trace the directions of effects between context-related factors and SE over time. Moreover, future studies could consider approaching students' engagement trajectories in and with school and learning, as current data provide evidence that patterns of engagement are different when it comes to school and learning.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

Despite the educational investments in Roma education, the overall impact on improving the school outcomes of students from Roma background has been limited. The relevance of SE in building successful school transitions helps explain the importance of this topic for research and practice (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Rosário et al., 2016). This study was conducted to explore trajectories of SE in students from Roma background attending elementary school. Based on current findings, the emotional dimension stood out at both school levels and over the school year, emphasizing peer relationships, particularly within the same cultural group. The reports on the behavioral dimension showed a

decreasing trend regarding attendance and compliance with school rules and expectations, except for participation in non-curricular activities. In the cognitive dimension, participants primarily employed superficial cognitive strategies, with limited progress in developing deeper strategies for improved outcomes.

Notably, the engagement experiences of students from Roma groups appeared to be more focused on the experience of the school (e.g., playing with friends in the yard and going to the cafeteria) rather than the learning process. Despite the efforts made by Roma parents and teachers to align their attitudes and practices to foster children's school outcomes, these endeavors lag far behind the expected. For example, students in elementary school still lack the cultural capital needed to organize and articulate their beliefs regarding the utility value of education for their future prospects (T. Moreira, Rosário, Azevedo, et al., 2022). Considering the current findings on SE trajectories, we suggest that school administrators and educators could consider setting opportunities for students from Roma groups to develop positive relationships with teachers and non-Roma peers, improve their school attendance consistently, and foster the development of deep cognitive strategies. Exploring the inner workings of SE trajectories may provide valuable insights and guidance in this pursuit. Existing literature (e.g., T. Moreira et al., 2023; T. Moreira, Rosário, Azevedo, et al., 2022; T. Moreira, Rosário, Martins, et al., 2022; Rosário et al., 2016, 2017) suggests the need to instill students' hope trajectories regarding their academic pursuits while broadening the perceived utility value of formal education.

Examining the findings under the lens of acculturation models sheds light on emotional engagement data. Current results indicate a strengthening of intracultural ties and a partial separation from the mainstream culture rather than full integration or inclusion. This is a worrying educational scenario that is expected to call the school administrators' and the educators' attention. There is a need to set educational countermeasures to help students from the Roma groups develop a healthy inclusion process. The interviews revealed data likely to help in this process. Students report showing the existence of positive connections with teachers, which creates an opportunity to bridge the two cultures and promote their SE. Importantly, building strong bonds with teachers also has the potential to enhance the behavioral and cognitive dimensions of engagement, as well as improve students' cultural capital and autonomy regarding school-based decision-making. Furthermore, teachers can guide students in developing cognitive and metacognitive strategies to overcome academic hardships faced by marginalized cultural groups. All students need to feel that they belong to the school community and that their learning process is a fundamental step in their development.

To sum up, the current findings suggest that targeting utility values of education and autonomy in the school context may be a straightforward bridge to strengthen the engagement of students from Roma groups. As supported by literature (e.g., T. Moreira, Rosário, Azevedo, et al., 2022; Rosário et al., 2016), implementing school-based training programs focused on multicultural approaches and acculturation processes can foster educators' cultural sensitivity and facilitate inclusive teaching practices, thereby mitigating the perpetuation of societal bias against ethnic minority groups, including the Roma community.

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