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Author:

Marta Anzillotti Zamorano  
*Lund University*  
*EUROFOUND*

[anzimarta@gmail.com](mailto:anzimarta@gmail.com)

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## **Understanding the Impact of the First Wave of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Access to Education of Roma Communities in Ukraine Using Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Theory**

Marta Anzillotti Zamorano

*Lund University / EUROFUND*

### **Abstract**

The global COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and in some cases exacerbated the already precarious education of Roma children in Ukraine. This study aims to understand how the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the education of Roma children by taking a wider look at structural issues affecting the Roma community. Using mixed methods in the form of interviews with stakeholders and a survey, this paper will engage in the larger structure-agency debate through the lens of Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory, Foster's enhancements of it, and Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality. The results show that between March 2020 and June 2020 the most vulnerable people in society were the ones most negatively impacted by the lockdowns and secondary effects of the pandemic. Underlying structural issues, underfunded and segregated schools with non-inclusive curriculums, intergenerational inequality, the digital divide, language barriers, intersectionality, and the pandemic's negative impacts on Roma parents are some of the causes that Roma families reported as barriers which keep Roma children from being able to access education. However, with the agency Roma individuals have, they chose how to respond to structural oppression. This paper also demonstrates the harmful impacts of stereotypes that deem a culture to be innately resistant to education. Throughout this paper, there is a nuanced discussion which engages with previous research and theories and applies

them to the new data, in order to provide a general understanding of topics that have not been heavily researched.

**Keywords:** Roma in Ukraine; education of Roma; COVID-19; Ogbu; cultural-ecological theory; Foster.

## Introduction

Continuing a long history of discrimination, the situation of the Roma remains one of the most critical social issues in Ukraine (ACFC, 2018, p. 21; Bocheva, 2019, p. 2).<sup>1</sup> Keeping in mind the diversity within the Roma communities, they continue to be marginalized across the board (ACFC, 2018, p. 22; Bocheva, 2019, p. 2). They face difficulties in accessing education, housing, healthcare, and employment, which was made even harder by the COVID-19 pandemic (ACFC, 2018, p. 22; Bocheva, 2019, p. 2). The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic - beginning in mid-March 2020 until early June of the same year, and which is strictly what this paper will focus on - resulted in unprecedented circumstances which profoundly changed the education sector (Bartosh, 2021, p. 1). This paper seeks to understand the impact of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of Roma children in Ukraine. To achieve this, John U. Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory will be applied analysing the underlying system of structural and intergenerational inequality against Roma communities in Ukraine.

As the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing at the time of writing, new perspectives may emerge. The information is accurate based on the data publicly available in November 2021. As such, there will also be no mention of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces which occurred in February 2022. Nevertheless, the issue of internally displaced people, the disruption of daily life, and the prioritizing of resources towards the war effort are all issues that will have an impact on the education of Roma people in Ukraine now and for years to come.

Initially, this paper will spell out some contextual information about the history of the Roma communities in Ukraine. Subsequently, there will be a brief outline of the theoretical approach employed, which is principally based on Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory, while also incorporating Foster's contribution to the topic and Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality. The methodology used will then be explained, followed by the application of the theoretical

framework to the data in the results and analysis section. Most of the background information and theoretical framework will be interwoven with the data and analysis. The conclusion of the paper recognises how the agency of Roma people is confined by oppressive anti-Roma structures, which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as it widened existing gaps in the education sector.

## **1. Background information & theoretical framework**

While there is some academic literature on the history of the Roma community in Ukraine, literature specifically about the education of the Roma community in Ukraine and even more specifically the impact of COVID on this sector is extremely scarce. According to the last All-Ukrainian Population Census of the State Statistic Committee of Ukraine, in 2001 there were 47,600 Roma people in the country (State Statistic Committee of Ukraine, 2001). However, other international organizations estimate that realistically the Roma population of Ukraine is between 200,000 and 400,000 as of 2019 (Council of Europe Office in Ukraine & Roma Women Fund “Chiricli,” 2020, p. 23).

Throughout their history, the Roma have been heavily persecuted in Ukraine having been enslaved, forced to assimilate, and brutally slaughtered (Bocheva, 2019, pp. 6–7). At the end of the nineteenth century and leading into the twentieth, there were several different groups of Roma in Ukraine with different languages, history, and traditions; with some being nomadic and others having completely settled (European Roma Rights Center, 2006, p. 17). For a brief period, the early Soviet years led to more Roma cultural and political activities, however, these developments came to a halt under Stalin (European Roma Rights Center, 2006, pp. 19–22; Konstantinova, 2012, pp. 2–4). Like many minorities, Roma people endured enormous suffering during the Second World War with 20,000 to 72,000 of the Roma genocide victims coming from within Ukraine’s current borders (Bocheva, 2019, p. 7; Kotljarchuk, 2022, p. 450). Shortly after independence from the Soviet Union, the Roma community in Ukraine suffered from severe unemployment (European Roma Rights Center, 2006, p. 25; Konstantinova, 2012, p. 5). This was because collective farms, where many settled Roma found employment, were reprivatized which forced them to uproot once again (European Roma Rights Center, 2006, p. 25; Konstantinova, 2012, p. 5). During the post-independence period laden with political and economic change, the Roma community has often been scapegoated due to suspicions of unfairly profiting from government programs at the expense of the

majority (European Roma Rights Center, 2006, p. 25; Konstantinova, 2012, p. 5). This incredibly brief history of the Roma community in Ukraine gives context and explains where the deep structural anti-Roma sentiments that will be explored in the results and analysis section date back to.

Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory is a central one in educational anthropology. In his research, Ogbu attempted to address the question of why some minorities do better in school than others (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 157). Based on their research, Ogbu and Simons (1998, p. 157) concluded that while genetic, linguistic, and cultural differences may contribute to distinctions amongst minorities, no minority is innately genetically, linguistically, or culturally more inclined towards success in formal education. Given these conclusions, Ogbu determined that two factors influence performance in formal education – the system and community forces (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 157). This loosely aligns with the broad debate in social sciences concerning structure and agency.

The system refers to the structural barriers and discrimination minorities face (Ogbu, 2003, p. 45; Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 158). It includes both forms of discrimination that directly impact the education of children and those that impact it in a more indirect manner (Ogbu, 2003, p. 45). For example, educational policies can be directly discriminatory against a minority (Ogbu, 2003, p. 45; Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 158). The lack of high returns the minorities may receive from their education is also another example of discrimination that directly impacts the minority children's education (Ogbu, 2003, p. 45; Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 158). Instead, discrimination in employment can result in limited economic resources, which in turn may negatively impact the education of minority children (Ogbu, 2003, p. 45).

According to Ogbu and Simons (1998, p. 161), while structural barriers are key determinants of low school performance, what causes a variation in school achievement amongst minorities are community forces. Ogbu and Simons (1998, p. 157) hypothesise that four factors comprise community forces: (1) a frame of minority school comparison - e.g., with schools 'back home' or in white suburbs; (2) beliefs about the instrumental value of schooling - e.g., the role of academic credentials in getting ahead; (3) relational interpretations of schooling - e.g., the amount of trust in schools and school personnel; (4) symbolic belief about schooling - e.g., whether learning is harmful to the cultural and linguistic identity of the minority. To scrutinise the topic in greater detail, this paper will only focus on the second factor. Ogbu (1992, p. 9) claimed that voluntary minorities are willing to surmount difficulties that arise as a result of

cultural differences in schooling, believing that academic achievement will pay off, leading to success in the labour market.<sup>2</sup> Involuntary minorities, however, often question the real value of schooling and are either not able to or do not want to separate behaviours that result in academic success from those that may result in acculturation or replacement of their cultural identities (Ogbu, 1983, p. 180; 1992, p. 9).<sup>3</sup> This separation of minorities into two categories recognises the history of oppression against involuntary minorities; however, as Foster argues, Ogbu then places too much emphasis on community forces/agency, to the point where he ends up using a culture of poverty reasoning (Foster, 2008, p. 588). Furthermore, Ogbu neglects the diversity within minority communities, which Crenshaw emphasizes in her work (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242).

Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory will be used as a starting point to analyse the role that structure and agency play in the case of the education of Roma children in Ukraine during the first wave of COVID-19. This paper will challenge some basic tenets of the cultural-ecological theory following in the footsteps of other authors who have successfully applied it to the case of Roma in various European contexts.<sup>4</sup> The aspects of primary importance in this paper will be unveiling how the underlying system of discrimination prior to the COVID-19 pandemic led to the issues that were revealed during the first wave of it. Another secondary aspect that will be analysed is the diversity within the Roma communities in Ukraine, as it leads to a more nuanced and complete understanding of the issue.

## **2. Methods**

The data analysed in this paper is from the joint research project 'Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe' conducted by the European Center for Minority Issues (Flensburg, Germany) and the University of Leicester (United Kingdom), with funding from the University of Leicester's QR Global Challenges Research Fund (Research England). A mixed-methods approach was used in this research, consisting of both surveys and interviews.

The surveys were conducted online in June 2020 online. Where this was not possible, they were administered over the phone. This was done to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Due to the lack of accurate and comprehensive demographics and the geographically-dispersed nature of the Roma community, it was not possible to have a representative sample. For this reason, respondents were recruited using snowball sampling. Most of the respondents were drawn from

urban areas across five different regions of Ukraine (Chernihiv oblast, Kherson oblast, Odessa oblast, Kharkiv oblast, and Zakarpattia oblast). Only respondents who had children in their care responded to the questions in the survey.

Ten semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted 2020 with Roma community leaders in the second half of July. They represented different stakeholders both at the national level and more specifically from six different regions (Chernihiv Kherson, Lviv, Odessa, Kharkiv, and Zakarpattia oblasts). Seven of the interlocutors were either chairs, founders, heads, or project directors at a research or civil society group. One of the interlocutors was a social educator, another one was an activist and the last one decided to remain anonymous. The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian and then translated into English. A second interview was also conducted with one of the interlocutors to gather more data. Not all the interlocutors were Roma, but they have all were heavily involved in the Roma community.

### **3. Results and analysis**

This section will include both results from the survey and the interviews intertwined with the theoretical framework and background information to confirm or contrast the findings. Initially, it will look at the general impact of COVID-19 on the level of education of Roma children in Ukraine; subsequently, the analysis will then focus on system forces and lastly on community forces. While they are kept separately to make the structure of this paper easier to follow, they are interdependent (Foster, 2008, p. 588). For this reason, they will be cross-referenced throughout.

#### ***3.1 The general impact of COVID-19***

The surveys and interviews both revealed the fact that the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in low-quality remote education, which had the most negative impact on those that were already vulnerable against a background of systemic inequality.

On 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the Ukrainian government ordered the shutdown of schools, which lasted until 11<sup>th</sup> May 2020 (OECD, 2020). Schools eventually reopened for in-person classes on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020, except for those that were in ‘red zone’ areas with high infection rates (OECD, 2020). This meant that, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote learning was the only way to access education for children in Ukraine. The survey conducted for this research paper revealed that 29 respondents out of 52 had school-aged children in their

household, of whom 21 (72.4%) said they had had the option to attend school remotely, meaning that 28% of Roma children in the survey were not able to attend school remotely. This statistic loosely aligns with that of the Vox Populi Agency (2020, p. 3), which carried out a comprehensive and representative sociological study on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma communities in Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> That study was conducted between 15<sup>th</sup> April and 1<sup>st</sup> May 2020, and found that of the 454 respondents whose children attended school before the quarantine, 80% of their children continued to remain engaged in education (Vox Populi Agency, 2020, p. 31). However, 9% of the 454 respondents said that their child(ren) engaged with their schooling, but with difficulty, and 6.4% said that they did so independently from the school (Vox Populi Agency, 2020, p. 31).

The interviews carried out for this research paper give more context to these statistics, confirming that in some cases there was a complete halt in education. All but two of the interlocutors mentioned the inferior quality of remote learning in some form. The survey also reveals the inferior quality of remote learning as most respondents were either dissatisfied (10, 47.6%) or very dissatisfied (5, 23.8%) with the quality of education delivered during the lockdown. Interlocutor five, head of a Roma NGO, (2020) explained how children, particularly those in grades 1-3, did not have the necessary knowledge to progress with their studies. Interlocutor three, a Roma activist (2020), also detailed how children in grade 1 were expected to learn how to read syllables, but they did not do so at all. Making matters worse, interlocutor one, the director of a research centre (2020), and interlocutor four, a social educator (2020), made it clear that if there were more lockdowns, the situation would continue to get worse. This reveals how damaging the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic was for the academic progress of Roma children, seriously hindering it and in some cases completely preventing it.

As reported in the literature and by six interlocutors in the interviews for this paper, the Ukrainian government and schooling system were not prepared for the move to remote learning (Bartosh, 2021, p. 233). In addition to this, there were financial cuts to schools as the budget was amended to fund measures to counteract the spread of COVID-19 (OECD, 2020, p. 6). There were some initiatives taken by the government, such as starting a YouTube channel to which they posted educational lessons (Bartosh, 2021, p. 233). Nevertheless, underlying issues such as the lack of access to technology, discrimination, and the illiteracy of parents, made it exceedingly difficult for Roma children to access education generally (Bartosh, 2021, p. 233). As the pandemic was unexpected, while it is comprehensible that the government was not



prepared to move the entire schooling system to remote learning, the government did not enact the necessary policies that targeted the education of Roma children, especially those from economically disenfranchised backgrounds. The following quotation expresses the frustration of those excluded from remote learning best: “They [the state] have clearly decided that everyone should have it [technology], and they are just wondering why people do not have it” (Interlocutor six, head of the board of a Roma organization, 2020).

In their interview, interlocutor nine, director of a Roma program at an international organization (2022), explained how the school system was already insensitive to the needs of Roma children. Consequently, when teachers had to switch to remote learning, the last of their concerns was making classes as inclusive as they previously were (interlocutor nine, director of a Roma program at an international organization, 2022). This made remote learning twice as difficult for Roma children. Interlocutor nine also expressed in their interview that they had tried to organise access to spaces that could lessen the impact of the digital divide, but this had not been possible due to the lockdown. Interlocutor eight, the national coordinator of a Roma organization (2020), also mentioned that they were running a pilot project to reduce the digital divide. This reveals the shortcomings of the government and the school system by failing to step in and cater to the unique needs of Roma children during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to the lack of an inclusive transition from in-person classes to remote learning, the low quality of remote learning exacerbated Roma children’s access to education. This included some of them (28%, according to the survey collected for this paper) who were not able to access remote education at all. COVID-19 widened existing differences, devastating an already fragile system. It made existing differences larger and neglected those who were already being left behind. Overall, the impact of the first wave of COVID-19 on the education of Roma children in Ukraine can be summarised in the following quotation: “Distance education disconnected the kids, whose presence at school had been questionable before the lockdown” (interlocutor four, a social educator, 2020).

The situation of the Roma has not generally improved in Ukraine since January 2012, despite the adoption of the “Strategy for Protection and Integration of the Roma National Minority into Ukrainian Society for the period until 2020” in April 2013 (ACFC, 2018, p. 21). In its latest report, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC) lamented how Roma in Ukraine “continue to suffer systemic discrimination



in access to education, adequate housing, health services, and employment” (ACFC, 2018, p. 2). This is the underlying system of intergenerational and systemic discrimination that the COVID-19 pandemic was overlaid upon. Given that Ogbu mostly focused on minorities’ responses to systemic discrimination, this section will not include a large amount of Ogbu’s cultural-ecological theory. On the contrary, this section seeks to unveil the deep structural discrimination unique to the Roma minority in Ukraine, opposing Ogbu’s idea that if what was holding minorities back was solely being discriminated against, then they would all be performing at the same level (Ogbu, 2003, p. 46; Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 161). Furthermore, it adds to the literature, as one of Lauritzen and Nodeland’s conclusions from their analysis of previous research on the education of Roma across Europe between 1997 and 2016 was that often there was too much emphasis on cultural differences between the Roma minority and the rest of society, rather than on structural discrimination against the Roma (Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018, p. 148).

### ***3.2 The system***

The ways in which the system hinders Roma children’s education in Ukraine can be classified into the following categories: systemic discrimination toward the education of Roma children before the COVID-19 pandemic, directly excluding some Roma children from remote learning, and systemic discrimination towards Roma parents that indirectly impacts the education of Roma children.

The ACFC report expressed concern over the segregated sub-standard schools that Roma pupils attend, as well as their overrepresentation in ‘special schools’ and underrepresentation in preschools (ACFC, 2018, pp. 42–43). They also express concern over integrated schools having quota systems for Roma students resulting in, for example, approximately 30% of Roma children in the city of Uzhhorod being refused enrolment in school N.20, thus preventing them from gaining education beyond the 4<sup>th</sup> grade (ACFC, 2018, p. 43). Additionally, Roma families face multiple obstacles, such as needing original birth certificates (which they often lack) to enroll in schools; if Roma children manage to attend school, they are faced with overcrowded classes and a lack of teaching materials (ACFC, 2018, p. 43). These are all examples of systemic discrimination which occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic that then was carried over and resulted in even graver consequences for Roma children’s learning. Interlocutor nine, director of a Roma program at an international organization (2022), detailed that schools attended by mostly or exclusively by Roma children - especially, but not only in Zakarpattia

oblast and Odesa oblasts - have been “traditionally and historically understaffed and underfinanced”. Interlocutor three, a Roma activist (2020), noted that there are over 100 segregated schools in Zakarpattia where the situation is ‘very difficult’, citing “old equipment and weak computerisation”. In line with the conclusions of the ACFC and some of the other interlocutors, interlocutor one, director of a research centre (2020), brought attention to the fact that segregated or purely Roma schools faced numerous issues before the quarantine, which then resulted in them being even more disadvantaged during the implementation of remote learning. Additionally, interlocutor nine, director of a Roma program at an international organization (2022), underlined that in almost all schools in Ukraine there was a lack of culturally-appropriate and inclusive curricula, that showed positive examples of Roma children. Bureaucratic barriers, overrepresentation in underfinanced schools, and curriculums that are not culturally inclusive to the Roma minority are structural issues that had previously impacted education of Roma children. During the pandemic, these issues were aggravated as they became of secondary importance during the drastic transition from in-person schooling to online schooling.

Lack of access to technology was the most widely reported issue both in the surveys and in the interviews. In the survey, when respondents were asked about the main barriers Roma children faced in accessing remote learning, they stated that it was the lack of computers (14, 73.7%), inadequate internet/TV connection (9, 47.4%), lack of adequate space for study (8, 42.1%), no private space for study (7, 36.8%) and lack of adequate information from the school (2, 10.5%). As for the interviews, all of the interlocutors mentioned the lack of technical support or the lack of access to technology in their interviews. Interlocutor two, chair of a Roma organization, (2020) explained how in some exceedingly rare cases children had managed to hand in their homework via SMS or teachers physically went to Roma houses and delivered the homework. However, they made clear that this was only in some instances. Furthermore, various interlocutors also pointed out that sometimes children had access to technology, but only in a limited way as their parents went to work. Overall, the data revealed that without consistent access to technology and the internet, the technical abilities needed to use it, the space necessary to learn, or the financial resources to hire a tutor, children become excluded from remote learning. These are all factors that could have been considered as indirectly impacting education before the pandemic; however, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic they were factors that could have directly excluded Roma children from education.

Hand-in-hand with the discussion of the digital divide is the discussion of intersectionality and diversity within the Roma community. Contrary to Ogbu's belief that minorities would all be doing the same if what was holding them back was solely being discriminated against, minorities are not all discriminated against in the same way (Ogbu, 2003, p. 46; Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 161). Not all Roma children were as negatively impacted as others by the pandemic, and not all Roma children lacked access to technology in order to part-take in online classes. Other authors who have applied Ogbu's theory to the Roma minority, such as Marczak (2016, p. 392) and Bereményi (2007, p. 120), note the lack of intersectionality in his work. There are an infinite number of different intersections one can analyse, but one that came up most often in the data was the intersection between being Roma with the economic background of the children. While the survey revealed that most respondents either disagreed (8, 40%) or neither agreed nor disagreed (9, 45%) with the statement that remote learning increased costs for the household, the interviews revealed the more indirect ways economic background had an impact on remote learning. Children from poorer families and those who live in Roma settlements faced the highest difficulty in accessing remote learning. While the Roma population is dispersed throughout all of Ukraine, a large number are concentrated in Zakarpattia, where according to the census data about 30% of the country's Roma population lives (Ukraine, 2016, p. 77). Additionally, a significant populations of Roma people can be found in Donetsk, Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, Kharkiv, and Luhansk (Ukraine, 2016, p. 77). Odesa oblast and Zakarpattia oblast were mentioned multiple times throughout different interviews as regions where Roma had significant difficulty in accessing education. In their interview, interlocutor six, head of the board of a Roma organization (2020), underscored how in Lviv oblast there is a stark difference between the settled Roma and those in temporary settlements. While the interlocutor recognised that both had issues in accessing remote education, they recognised that what happened in the settlements was 'a different story' and that children from there did not have any distance education. Access to education was also easier in the cities rather than in more isolated areas. Those places where Roma children were more segregated and economically disenfranchised were those where the digital divide was harsher, and therefore where fewer children were able to access remote learning. This aligns with Crenshaw's theory on intersectionality, which, states that often when structural issues are discussed the differences *within* groups are ignored, creating tension *among* groups (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). She notes how the identities of a woman or a person of colour are often referred

to as an either/or identity; never as women *and* of colour, resulting in them being marginalized in both feminist and anti-racist discussions (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1242–1244). For these reasons, it is important to recognise the differences between Roma communities across Ukraine and consider the various intersections.

Another intersection that needs more attention is Roma girls. Interlocutor five, head of Roma NGO, (2020) explained how in some groups within the Roma community early marriage is practiced. In these cases, girls get married in grades 9-10 significantly complicating their education. This intersection needs to be studied as in the interviews, for example, there were two opposing views. Interlocutor six, head of the board of a Roma organization (2020), said that they had already considered remote learning as an option for girls to keep studying. They believed that the greater “determining factor” was the “technical opportunities”, rather than the distance when it came to education. When saying this, they considered that in this way girls could even attend classes with their grandmothers and not every day, but at least it would give them a certificate. However, the tenth interlocutor (2020), opposed this view, saying that they believed girls would will not be given the opportunity to “sit and study”. More data would have to be gathered to find out which of these is true positions and where such a program could successfully be implemented and why.

A frequent response to this nuanced argument considering intersectionality is that everyone faced challenges during the pandemic. Two interlocutors rightly pointed out that COVID-19 hindered every child’s education. Another interlocutor affirmed that remote learning had a negative impact on everyone’s education, but also recognised that more financially-privileged children were able to afford to transfer to a private educational programmes. Interlocutor nine, director of a Roma program at an international organization (2022), brought up a very useful analogy in their interview to illustrate the differences between what more privileged children faced versus more underprivileged children:

It is like basically saying like we all of those children facing all of the same problems were not on the same boat, someone was on a yacht in an ocean of challenges and someone was trying to survive on a raft (Interlocutor nine, director of a Roma program at an international organization, 2022).

This shows how COVID-19 made discrimination that had previously only indirectly impacted education (such as the digital divide) a lot more direct, therefore impairing Roma children’s access to education even further. Generally, those in a better position within the system suffered

less as they had the resources to correct the new issues that emerged from the pandemic. Had the system not been so fragile, to begin with, and had everyone had adequate access to social security resources, the impact may have not been so significant. This means that COVID-19 exacerbated the issues caused by oppressive underlying structures, but due to their oppressive nature the underlying structures influenced how much of a devastating impact that a shock to the system such as COVID-19 had.

Another aspect that contributes to the specific way each Roma child is discriminated against again is their parents' background. The situation of Roma parents is one that continued to be an indirect influence on Roma children's education throughout the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the time, additional involvement of parents to assist their children with remote learning was required. The survey revealed that few respondents strongly agreed (1, 4.8%) or agreed (2, 9.5%) with whether they were able to assist the children in their household with their homework. The interviews showed that there were numerous causes as to why this was. One of the major ones is parents being illiterate and/or uneducated; this includes a lack of IT knowledge, which became of paramount importance in order to assist their children with remote learning.

In addition, interlocutor one, director of a research centre (2020), mentioned that sometimes there is a language barrier as not all Roma parents speak Ukrainian. As a consequence, and as interlocutor nine, director of a Roma program at an international organization (2022) says, the school system does not always cater to a Roma child's needs. This includes offering lessons in their native language, such as Romanes, and - particularly in the case of Zakarpatska oblast – Slovak and Hungarian (interlocutor nine, director of a Roma program at an international organization, 2022). This not only means that parents cannot help their children with their schooling, which became even more important during the pandemic, but it also means that children face more difficulties learning and do not have access to culturally appropriate curricula.

Another example of structural discrimination indirectly impacting children's education is parents being too busy or tired from work that they cannot help their children. Four interlocutors mentioned how parents are so busy and/or prioritise survival and ensuring they have food that they did not help with their children's schoolwork. A briefing note from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) stated that due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of borders, local markets and small

businesses, numerous Roma families have lost their main sources of income (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020, p. 4). Interlocutor seven, chair of a Roma NGO (2020) remarked that parents being busy was in part due to this increased unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the psychological tolls of quarantine. This was confirmed by the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU) which noted the stressful conditions for Roma families faced during the quarantine due to that the lack of access to adequate and/or sufficient healthcare, information, and water would make containing any outbreaks of COVID-19 particularly challenging (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020, pp. 8–9).

This all demonstrates how certain aspects that previously indirectly impacted Roma children's education - such as their parents being busy, illiterate, or speaking a different language - became even more influential in their children's academic achievement, as the COVID-19 pandemic required parents to take more of an active role in their children's education. This was not always possible due to intergenerational inequality, the psychological toll of quarantine, and increased unemployment.

Underfinanced segregated schools, curricula that are not culturally inclusive, language barriers to education, the digital divide, intersectionality with other forms of oppression, intergenerational inequality, and the disproportionate negative impacts of the pandemic on Roma parents are all issues that compounded, creating a high barrier to education during the first wave of the COVID-19. Every Roma child faced a unique combination of these forms of discrimination. All of these issues are deeply entrenched within the fabric of Ukrainian society, making them very difficult to solve. This means that even if the most-cited issue - namely the digital divide - would be fixed, there would still be other underlying issues as this quote explains:

Imagine that all Roma children from these families will now be provided with technical access to tasks – this will not solve the problem completely because the factors I described earlier will overlap [referring to unequal treatment by teachers, and lower quality of education for Roma students, low levels of literacy of Roma parents, low level of IT knowledge, and housing and space issues]. These factors are not new, they did not appear with COVID-19, they used to be an obstacle to the realization of the right to education. But I will repeat once again: during the lockdown, these factors were catalysed and fully revealed their negative effect (interlocutor one, director of a research centre, 2020).

According to Ogbu and Simons (1998, p. 161), the minorities' response to the system is community forces, which they claim differs between voluntary and involuntary minorities. They recognise that when voluntary minorities experience discriminatory educational policies as well as language and cultural differences, particularly when they first move, this does not endure, and it does not impact their long-term school performance (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 164). This contrasts with the response of involuntary minorities that, according to Ogbu (1983, p. 180), often question the real value of schooling. For the purpose of this paper, categorising the Roma into either an involuntary or voluntary minority is not imperative, especially as Ogbu sees it as a spectrum, rather than a dichotomy (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 168). Furthermore, the goal of this paper is not to compare minorities but to analyse the response of the Roma community to structural oppression. As Bereményi notes in his work Ogbu's model was very innovative in taking macro-ideas of social inequalities and injustices and explaining how these could impact academic achievement (Bereményi, 2007, p. 120). For this reason, this paper and more specifically this section uses his work as a theoretical framework. However, the data supported by other contributions of other scholars to Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory will point out some contradictory elements.

### ***3.3 Community forces***

Ogbu believes that black children question whether it is worth it to keep persevering until they succeed academically because: (a) it is not part of their cultural tradition to persevere in academic tasks; (b) children observe older members of the black community and learn that academic achievement does not always lead to jobs; and (c) parental encouragement on the importance of education is often overridden by minority children witnessing their parents suffer from the lack of adequate employment and discrimination (Ogbu, 1983, p. 180). According to Ogbu (1993, p. 495) African Americans will say, when asked directly, that they believe education can get them ahead. However, his own and other fieldwork led Ogbu to believe that this is not actually the case, as the actions of African Americans and their response to the system does not reflect this sentiment (Ogbu, 1993, p. 495).

The following quotations from interlocutor four, a social educator (2020) express a slightly contradictory idea, which perfectly encapsulates Ogbu's theory:

- 1) However, no one includes them [Roma] in the process. And they, themselves, are reluctant to be included (interlocutor four, a social educator, 2020).



- 2) If we take into account all the factors that affect unmotivated children...  
(interlocutor four, a social educator, 2020).

First, the interlocutor acknowledges both times that there are systemic factors that impact and are the source of discrimination towards Roma children, but then he contradicts this by calling them unmotivated and saying they are reluctant to be included in education. This echoes one of Foster's critiques of Ogbu saying that he only mentions the equivalence of the system and community forces in a *pro forma* act, as Ogbu then proceeds to engage in a 'culture of poverty' discussion (Foster, 2008, p. 588). Instead, Foster (2008, p. 586) proposes that culture is dynamic, constantly negotiated, and contested, opposing Ogbu's portrayal of culture as static and fixed. Culture is forged in its historical and contemporary context involving an ongoing interactive process; as opposed to a singular entity that is created once and then remains fixed, never changing (Foster, 2008, p. 587). Ogbu's great emphasis on agency results in the low academic performance of minorities such as the Roma being explained using a culture of poverty explanation or blaming the group's lack of willingness or inability to cater to the demands of the educational system (Luciak, 2004, p. 363). This aligns with what interlocutor one, director of a research centre (2020) explains in their interview, stating that teachers hold prejudices against Roma children based on the widespread belief that Roma parents do not want their children to receive a high-quality education.

In their interview, interlocutor six, head of the board of a Roma organization (2020), describes how the Lviv Roma who do not live in settlements are very well-integrated, they have no issues with documents to attend school, and understand the importance of going to school. This behavior leans towards the voluntary minority response to the system. Interlocutor six, head of the board of a Roma organization (2020), then opposes this by highlighting the situation of the Roma in the settlements, who according to the interlocutor do not see the value in schooling due to the lack of prospects and relevance of education to their lifestyle. This instead aligns more with the response of involuntary minorities. While more data in this specific context is needed to support this, the detailed analysis of the system forces that limit the access to education, particularly of Roma who live in the settlements, leads to the reasoning that, in part, the system forces and the different intersections of oppression cause such a different outcome in terms of academic achievement. This was confirmed by interlocutor nine, director of a Roma program at an international organization (2022), who in their interview who emphasized how overcoming the barriers of the system is not a matter of hard work, as they are systemic issues.

According to Ogbu (1983, p. 180), the disillusionment about the job ceiling, as well as perceptions of limited opportunity, cause black people to question the value of schooling. Involuntary minority children witness the unemployment, underemployment, and discrimination of their parents, which overrides the parental verbal encouragement to do well in school (Ogbu, 1983, p. 180). In interlocutor three's interview, themselves a Roma activist (2020), they stated that progress had been made in having Roma parents understand the importance of education. This sentiment was also echoed by interlocutor two, chair of a Roma organization, (2020), although they noted that more progress needed to be made. Going further into detail, interlocutor three, a Roma activist (2020), recalled how 50 Roma students in Zakarpattia were dealing with a lack of employment. They then demanded for more attention be placed on what Roma students can do after they graduate from university. This aligns with the systemic discrimination when it comes to employment that was noted in the ACFC report notes (ACFC, 2018, p. 2). According to interlocutor seven, chair of a Roma NGO (2020)'s interview, another systemic issue that can cause Roma children not to go to school is being called names and other forms of harassment, especially when teachers ignore it. This is supported by interlocutor nine, director of a Roma program at an international organization (2022), who emphasised that it is not only the discrimination that their parents face but also the discrimination Roma children face themselves, that causes them not to want to go to school.

Foster, unlike Ogbu, states that system forces are constantly related to, informed, and are opposed by community forces which are mutually impacting one another (Foster, 2008, p. 588). This causes continuous change and means that changes in the education sector can alter the importance Roma people place on education and vice-versa. Using this logic, it is impossible to state that a culture or a community is inherently opposed to education as it is ever-changing.

Related to the point made by interlocutor seven, chair of a Roma NGO (2020), about discrimination by teachers, it is noteworthy that few respondents of the survey (2, 6.9%) disagreed with the statement that the children in their household were treated the same as non-Roma children by school authorities during the lockdown. Reasons as to why this would all be highly speculative, so they will not be listed here. The Roma community's perception of discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic is a noteworthy topic for further research.

Lastly, as interlocutor one, director of a research centre (2020) noted in their interview "the technical aspect is probably the easiest thing to fix;" it is the underlying issues and the deep structural oppression that needs to change in order for Roma children to be able to learn and be

included in the schooling system. She expresses the authorities' unwillingness to do so in the following quotation:

In my opinion, the authorities and various state systems, educational authorities, in particular, are not willing to constantly, systematically, and purposefully work with this community (interlocutor one, director of a research centre, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, taking the analogy made by interlocutor nine, director of a Roma program at an international organization (2022), further: the size of a person's boat in a sea of equal challenges is heavily influenced by the particular intersection of the oppressed groups that one is a part of. With that, a decision can be made on how to navigate the boat in order to navigate through the ocean of challenges, which would be one's community forces or agency.

This paper sought to uncover the impact of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma children's education in Ukraine. It engaged in a dialogue regarding Roma culture, which is tricky to navigate, as Brüggemann (2014) concludes in his paper. As a result of discussing culture, there may be stronger perceptions of cultural differences such as the false, yet widely shared, assumptions that Roma people do not have high regard for education (Brüggemann, 2014, p. 448). On the other hand, neglecting cultural differences may result in a lack of attention towards existing social practices and/or the delegitimization of minority rights (Brüggemann, 2014, p. 448). Foster argues that the theorist should not aim to have a list of traits that describe any given minority group, but instead believes the theorist should note the constant and unresolved negotiations over which traits accurately describe a group (Foster, 2008, p. 587). Recognising these traits is important in order to effect dynamic and responsive interventions that are not possible when one group is labelled as adaptive to school success and another is labelled as less adaptive due to certain inherent traits (Foster, 2008, p. 588).

Following this reasoning, this paper has outlined the complexities behind the education of Roma children in the times of COVID-19. The pandemic intensified a long list of issues and reordered them in terms of how significant of a negative impact they would have on the education of Roma children. These include: underfinanced segregated schools, non-culturally inclusive curricula, intergenerational inequality, language barriers to education, the digital divide, intersectionality with other forms of oppression, and the disproportionately negative

impacts of the pandemic on Roma parents. Some issues such as Roma parents being illiterate, as well as the digital divide, impacted the education of Roma children before the pandemic, but now played a much more critical role in the quality of the education and sometimes even if education was available at all. These are the structural issues afflicting the Roma community.

Using Ogbu's cultural-ecological model this paper delved into the community forces. Some aspects of Ogbu's cultural-ecological model such as the lack of employment disincentivizing children of involuntary minorities to study were confirmed. Other aspects of the theory, such as academic achievement not being part of the culture of an involuntary minority were not confirmed. Instead, Foster's enhancements and Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality were truer than what the data reflected. Culture is ever-changing, with structures impacting individuals and the individuals impacting structures. Furthermore, every individual is faced with a unique intersection of structural oppression. For these reasons it is impossible to say that a culture is innately resistant to education.

This study applied Ogbu's cultural-ecological model in a different context. It has contributed to a better understanding of the model by looking at how it fares within a European Roma context rather than in the original African-American context. This case study also took into account critiques that have emerged, forming a more nuanced argument. Lastly, it found a balance between understanding the deep-rooted structural oppression that minorities face and their own agency.

The conclusions of this paper can hopefully contribute to growing the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on Roma children's education and in general on Roma children's academic achievements in Ukraine. This paper sought to provide a well-rounded understanding of the topic echoing the sentiments of Roma activists and stakeholders and placing it in the current discourse of structure and agency. Further research is certainly necessary, especially within certain intersections of the Roma community such as specific locations, gender, and class.

## ***Notes***

<sup>1</sup> Following the Explanatory Note by the Council of Europe, for the purpose of this paper the term “Roma and Travellers” will refer to on one hand: a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom, and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term “Gens du voyage”, as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies (Ad Hoc Committee Of Experts On Roma And Traveller Issues (CAHROM), 2017, p. 1).

<sup>2</sup> Voluntary or immigrant minorities are those that have voluntarily moved seeking better opportunities, which may include employment, political or religious freedom, etc (Ogbu, 1992, p. 8; 1995, p. 202; 2003, p. 50; Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 164).

<sup>3</sup> Involuntary minorities are those who have been forced against their will to be permanently part of the dominant society by being either conquered, colonised and/or enslaved (Ogbu, 1992, p. 8; 1995, p. 203; 2003, p. 50; Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 165).

<sup>4</sup> Kyuchukov applied the theory in Bulgaria (Kyuchukov, 2017), Marczak to the case of Romanian Roma in Wrocław, Poland (Marczak, 2016), Brüggemann to Roma children in Spain (Brüggemann, 2014), Bereményi to Roma in Badalona and Bogotá (Bereményi, 2007), and Luciak to minority children across Europe, including the Roma minority (Luciak, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> The study was conducted for the International Renaissance Foundation, an international organization founded by George Soros (Vox Populi Agency, 2020, p. 1).

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