

## Student dropouts and the difficulty to speak about themselves

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### ABSTRACT

*The article discusses problems which emerged while we were conducting research on student dropout. The term student dropout refers to individuals who leave school before completing compulsory education. These problems relate mostly to the difficulty of those who have dropped out from talking about their own experience. The research was carried out in Greece in 2018 and 2019. In Greece, student dropout has fallen considerably in recent years to among the lowest in Europe. Nevertheless it remains a problem. Our aim is to present this difficulty, the consequences on the production of data, and the ways in which they were dealt with. We investigate the causes and consequences of this refusal, through the eyes of the people who abandoned school.*

### KEYWORDS

*Student dropout, Greece, qualitative research, interview quality, stance of universalism*

### RÉSUMÉ

*Dans cet article nous discutons les problèmes qui émergent au cours de recherche sur l'abandon scolaire. Le terme d'abandon scolaire se réfère aux personnes qui ont abandonné l'école avant d'achever leur scolarité obligatoire. Ces problèmes sont essentiellement liés à la difficulté de ces personnes à parler de leur propre expérience. La recherche a été menée en Grèce durant une année, de 2018 à 2019. En Grèce l'abandon scolaire a baissé considérablement ces dernières années et il est l'un des plus bas en Europe. Néanmoins, il demeure un problème. Notre objectif est de l'analyser ainsi que ses conséquences sur la production des données et les moyens d'y faire face. Nous étudions les causes et les conséquences de ce refus à travers le regard des personnes qui ont abandonné l'école obligatoire.*

### MOTS-CLÉS

*Abandon scolaire, Grèce, recherche qualitative, qualité de l'interview, position d'universalisme*

## INTRODUCTION

Most research on student dropout is quantitative (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013; Gil, Antelm-Lanzat, Cacheiro-González, & Pérez-Navío, 2019; Rendon, 2014; Stark & Noel, 2015). There is comparatively little qualitative research (Hailu, Kassaw, & Wondimu, 2019; Knesting, 2008; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). For the validity of their research, researchers present the methods, techniques and tools that they used but rarely mention the problems they encountered. The researchers' good intentions are not sufficient for people to trust them and be willing to speak about themselves and their own experiences. Some are unwilling from the outset, others agree to speak but then during the interview they don't open up or they avoid talking about certain topics.

It is our intention to present the problems that arose during the conduct of qualitative research on student dropout in Greece and the ways in which we dealt with them. The problems described in the article refer to research on student dropout in Greece. The field research began in March 2018 and it is completed by the end of November 2019.

In terms of the structure of the text, to begin with, the research on student dropout is described and reference is then made to the material used in the article. Then the problems and the means of dealing with them are presented.

## THE PROBLEM OF STUDENT DROPOUT AND OUR RESEARCH

The term "student dropout" refers to individuals who leave school before completing compulsory education.<sup>1</sup> This is the official term used by the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP), the body responsible for recording student dropout in Greece.

Student dropout emerged as a major social problem in the United States in the 1960s (Rumberger, 2011, p. 4). Nowadays it is seen as a significant problem because it is linked to the individuals' socio-economical state and wellbeing, the economy of the country and social cohesion (European Commission, 2013, 2016; Lamb & Markussen, 2011; Nikolaou, Para, & Gogou, 2018). States and international organizations prioritize measures for a drastic reduction in dropout, since education is considered to be a fundamental human right, a prerequisite for the exercise of all other rights (European Commission, 2011; UNESCO, 2016).

In Greece, student dropout has fallen considerably in recent years to among the lowest in Europe. Nevertheless it remains a problem. In the three years of Junior High School it is estimated to be 19.5% for the 1980-1981 student cohort<sup>2</sup> (Paleocrassas, Rousseas, & Vretakou, 1997) and 4.62% (4,740 students) for the 2014-2015 *student cohort*. In the primary school<sup>3</sup> it amounted to 1.79% (1,789 students) for the first<sup>4</sup> *student cohort* and 1.54% (1,497 students) for the second. In total, 8,116 of the students registered in the first year of primary school and the

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<sup>1</sup> Up until 2006 in Greece, this was nine years, 6 years primary and 3 years junior high. Today it is 11. The two years in kindergarten were added,

<sup>2</sup> The student cohort refers to the total number of students registered in the first year of all the Junior High Schools in the country in the school year 1980-1981. The students' progress was studied for three school years. The rate of student dropout refers to the students in the cohort who, at the end of the three years, had not completed junior high school because they had left in either the first, the second or the third year.

<sup>3</sup> Student dropout in the primary school was measured for the first time in the school year 2013-2014.

<sup>4</sup> The student cohort for the school year 2014-2015 in the primary school was separated into two cohorts, since attendance lasts six years. The first comprises students who were registered in the first year in the school year 2014-2015 and their progress was studied for three years (years one, two and three) and the second for the students who were registered in year four in the school year 2014-2015 and their progress was studied for three years (years four, five and six).

first year of junior high school in the school year 2014-2015 left school at the end of the 2016-2017 academic year (Giovanoglou, Papadopoulou, & Papadopoulou, 2019).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Grounded Theory (GT), which ‘*can really tease out the elements of the operation of a setting or the depths of an experience*’ (Grbich, 2013, p. 79) was chosen as the *research method*. ‘*The approach is phenomenological, but it goes beyond phenomenology because the explanations around the topic are used to develop new theories*’ (Nie, 2017, p. 57). Utilizing GT procedures, the researcher is able ‘*to uncover the beliefs and meanings that underlie action, to examine rational as well as non-rational aspects of behaviour, and to demonstrate how logic and emotion combine to influence how persons respond to events or handle problems*’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 11). In addition, the theoretical tools of GT, together with its flexibility, allow for the study of suppressed practices and the discovery of ‘*ideological roots of implicit meanings, actions, and larger social processes of which people may be unaware*’ (Charmaz, Thornberg, & Keane, 2018, p. 720). From the three main versions of GT, the ‘*Straussian*’ (Grbich, 2013, p. 79) was chosen, because it recognizes the importance of the ‘*theoretical pre-comprehensions*’ and the constructive role of the bibliography (Tsiolis, 2014, p. 88).

Data was collected using the interview technique which is widely adopted in the context of GT (Charmaz & Bryant, 2016). The interview is a fruitful method for data production when understanding of the subjective meaning that the participants assign to their thoughts and action is sought (Lune & Berg, 2017). The semi-structured interview was chosen since it gives the researcher greater freedom – in relation to the structured interview – to follow up aspects of the topic that the interviewee considers important, while it allows him/her – more than the unstructured interview does – to focus on the research questions (Brinkmann, 2018).

The research was carried out in Elis (Ilia), one of Greece’s 51 prefectures. There are 159,300 residents, 94 primary schools and 34 junior high schools. It was chosen because over the last 4 decades it has displayed a dropout rate well above the national average. In the primary schools it was 4.36% (national average 1.79%) for the first cohort, and in the junior high schools 8.60% (national average 4.62%) (Giovanoglou et al., 2019).

The research population was individuals aged 18-50 who had dropped out of compulsory education between the school years 1980-1981 and 2013-2014.

‘Theoretical sampling’ was used for the selection of participants. This is a repeated process for the collection and analysis of data which stops when ‘theoretical saturation’ is reached. In other words, the interviews continue until it is clear that no new evidence is emerging and the categories have been sufficiently shaped (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

52 interviews had been carried out. The participants (25 men and 27 women) constitute the sample referred to in this article. 20 are between 18 and 28 years old, 12 are between 29 and 40 years old and 20 are between 41 and 50 years old. Of the 52 participants, 18 are Roma.

### *Locating participants*

The first problem we encountered was the location of individuals who met the criteria for participation in the research. It was more difficult as we didn’t have a list of those who had dropped out of compulsory education. The offices of the Ministry of Education did not grant access to the school files, as we had hoped. Hence, three strategies were examined for the location of participants:

➤ *The ‘advertisement’ strategy*: Initially the publication of the research in local newspapers and on social media was considered (Roulston, 2010). However, it was judged

unsuitable for the following three reasons: Firstly, not everyone has access to newspapers or the internet. Secondly, many don't read newspapers or use social media. Thirdly, some of those who dropped out of school are functionally or technologically illiterate. Consequently, a portion of the target-population would have been excluded from the research from the outset.

➤ *The personal networks strategy*: This strategy was judged to be more suitable for our research. We requested the assistance of friends and colleagues (Roulston, 2010). We formed a list of 65 individuals of various ages who worked in the area and who could suggest candidates for interview. These individuals constitute our '*personal network*' and are referred to here as '*key informants*' (Bryman, 2012, p. 439). In ethnographic research, the '*key informants*' are chosen for their knowledge of the environment, their institutional role or their links to interest groups. They are of vital importance to the research because without them the attraction of participants from inaccessible populations is difficult or impossible (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Peek & Fothergill, 2009). We asked for help from 42 '*key informants*', two of whom '*Roma mediators*'<sup>5</sup>. 23 suggested individuals for interview. The other 19<sup>6</sup> stated that they knew of individuals who had dropped out of school but weren't able to convince them. It is possible that some '*key informants*' neglected the task or didn't have sufficient communication skills. The statement that almost half of them weren't able to convince even one participant reveals the difficulty in approaching this population and the need for an extensive network of '*key informants*'.

We had 4 steps to the participant recruitment strategy: i) In line with the requirements of the theoretical sampling, we contacted '*key informants*' who we believed could introduce us to individuals. ii) We briefed them individually on the purpose and importance of the research, the procedure, the criteria that the individuals should meet and the way in which they should approach them. iii) When a '*key informant*' approached a potential participant, he informed him about the research and asked him gently to take part in it. If the individual appeared willing, the '*key informant*' arranged a first get-to-know-you meeting with us. iv) We met the potential participant, usually in the presence of the '*key informant*' and informed him thoroughly about the research, the framework and the procedure for its conduct, the recording and the protection of their privacy.

Half of the individuals were willing to be interviewed during our first meeting. In this case the '*key informant*' left and the interview took place. When we realized that a potential participant was in a hurry, was hesitant or felt uncomfortable with the space, we didn't put any pressure on him but instead arranged a new meeting for the interview, hence giving him time to think about it. Our stance not to be impatient or hasty help to build trust and establish rapport, which is a fundamental prerequisite of the interview. '*Essentially*', mention DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006, pp. 316-317), '*rapport involves trust and a respect for the interviewee and the information he or she shares*'. Respect for the interviewee further facilitated participation, as it became known that we were not coercive. So, of those we briefed, only three didn't agree to an interview.<sup>7</sup>

➤ *The snowball strategy*: This is a sampling strategy used to approach '*difficult*' populations. The participants suggest individuals to the researcher. Sampling stops when the participants no longer add anything new to the study (Lune & Berg, 2017; Schwandt, & Gates, 2018). At the start of the research we used the strategy in question as a supplementary strategy. If one of the participants mentioned that they had friends who had dropped out of school, we

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<sup>5</sup> Individuals trained within the framework of a European Union programme to act as mediators between the vulnerable social group of the Roma and the public organizations, with the aim of promoting the access of the Roma to the spaces of work, health and quality education.

<sup>6</sup> Although they couldn't suggest individuals for interview or contribute in any real way to the research, they are also referred to as '*key informants*' as the material used for the article mentions them.

<sup>7</sup> Our behaviour influences the research as well as other researchers' access to the field (Lune & Berg, 2017).

asked him to introduce us to them. Although this proved effective, we gave it up because we discovered many similarities in the interviews. We attributed it to the fact that some who had been interviewed were informing their friends of the content.

### ***Unwillingness to participate in the research***

Finding individuals who meet the criteria is the first necessary step but not all are willing to speak. Based on the reports from the ‘key informants’, this unwillingness could be:

➤ *The absence of material incentives:* The attraction of participants with material incentives is a controversial issue (Denscombe, 2010). Although the bibliography notes cases where the participants received money (Cook, 2012; Kinard, 2004), we ruled this option out from the beginning. Not so much for financial reasons as for ethical ones (bribing people for their personal stories, uncontrolled turnout of interested parties). We attempted, in contrast, to persuade the participants, by presenting the problem of student dropout and stressing their contribution to the research.

➤ *Suspicious about the research:* Some were suspicious about the research for two reasons: i) They worked in the public sector and were worried we might be investigating the legality of their appointment. The conviction of a cleaner who used forged titles to get appointed contributed to this. In the words of Kyveli, a school traffic warden: *“I couldn’t sleep last night! I was afraid I’d lose my job because I didn’t finish high school. When they employed us, they just wanted the primary school leaving certificate”*. ii) Some who received benefits or disability pensions were worried in case we informed the Authorities about their work or family situation. Most male Roma claimed to be unemployed, while many female Roma claimed to be divorced. To calm their worries we showed them our professional and police identity cards highlighting to the ‘key informants’ that they too provide information regarding our professional status.

➤ *The structure of the Roma family:* The participation of Roma was especially difficult, owing to the organization of the family. Married women should ensure the consent of their husband, unmarried girls usually asked their mother or aunt for permission and the young men required permission from their father or an uncle. Two women who had initially agreed to be interviewed in a place outside the settlement cancelled the meeting, because their husbands did not allow it. To overcome this problem we conducted most of the interviews with Roma within the settlements and in the yards of their houses, in common view, accompanied by the ‘key informant’. After the interview we accepted the invitation of the older members for a drink and a chat. This helped in the building of trust, and facilitated our access to the settlement because it ensured the informal permission of the settlement leaders (Hennink, 2017).

➤ *Families with troubled relationships:* Individuals from families with troubled relationships were unwilling to be interviewed. For this reason we highlighted that ‘key informants’ should not approach individuals who lived in a dysfunctional family environment. A key informant suggested a 20 year-old who lived alone but in his paternal family there was alcoholism and violence. At our first meeting he wanted details of the interview questions. When he had been briefed, he agreed to be interviewed at a later meeting. However, he failed to turn up for the interview on two occasions. The explanation he gave to the ‘key informant’ concerned his relationship with his family: *“He would ask me about my parents and I don’t want to talk about them, I am ashamed”*.

➤ *Data collection technique:* According to reports from the ‘key informants’, the interview was off-putting for a number of reasons to do with anonymity and the concern that perhaps they would be unable to answer. Some of those who refused to be interviewed would willingly fill in a questionnaire. We asked the ‘key informants’ to guarantee the participants their anonymity and to inform them of the issues covered in the interview.

➤ *Negative school experiences:* Some ‘key informants’ mentioned that some refused to be interviewed and reacted angrily: *“Interview? I don’t want to hear about school!”*, *“I’ve*

*finished with school!*”, “*What do those teachers want from me?*”. Their reaction was probably due to negative school experiences, since the recollection of intense past experiences affects people’s emotional mood (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Of course, many participants had bad memories of school but these didn’t prevent them from being interviewed. In fact, negative school experiences seemed to push some to be interviewed in order to express perhaps the injustice and anger that they still felt. 32 year-old Elpiniki was very angry with the authoritarian behaviour of a teacher, even though two decades had passed, while 43 year-old Orpheus decried the indifference of his teacher:

*(A)nd it’s still like that:: racism at school #180#<sup>8</sup> (.)and that is really awful [...] Because there::is<sup>9</sup> this here teacher today who I had in the first, second, third year (.) .hhh [...] and those three years of my childhood she knocked me about something terrible [...] .hhh A lot::I’ve got a lot of anger inside (Elpiniki, lines 118, 120, 122 & 132)<sup>10</sup>*

*None of us who were at school then learned to read and write [...] the teacher didn’t give us anything to do, we hadn’t opened any books (Orpheus, lines 40 & 620).*

Both of *them* wanted their voices to be heard and they urged us at the end of the interview: ‘*Write all that down*’ (Elpiniki), ‘*Write it down just like I told you!*’ (Orpheus).

➤ *The low educational level:* Some members of the target population refused to be interviewed informing the ‘*key informants*’ that they didn’t know how to speak properly or that they weren’t brave enough. Indicatively, a 41 year-old woman mentioned, prior to the interview:

*I hesitated before coming here. I’ve never been interviewed before, I don’t know if I’ll manage. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know but I don’t speak well, I forget important words. My whole life I’ve been afraid to say what’s on my mind in case I don’t say it properly (Nefeli).*

The same is true for the functionally illiterate. Some were in a difficult position when we asked them to read the informed consent form and finally refused to do it, saying: ‘*you told me what it says, it’s not necessary*’, ‘*the letters are small*’, ‘*I’m bored right now*’.

In many cases this unwillingness to participate in the research appears indirectly or directly in others forms of procedural refusal. From this perspective we can distinguish three related forms.

➤ *The space where the interviews were held:* The space played an important role in the interview and affected the quality of the data. The choice of place is influenced by the conditions as well as by the demographic features of the participants (Herzog, 2012). In our research, the interview space troubled most of the participants. The younger ones chose public spaces, likes coffee shops. The older ones preferred their homes. The Roma women avoided spaces outside their settlement. Young women in villages usually avoided their village. For this reason, we accepted the spaces chosen by the participants even if they weren’t suitable. Some interviews took place in noisy places because the participants felt more comfortable due to the presence of other people or because they were the owners of the businesses. Of the 52 interviews, 20 took place in houses (of the participants, the researcher, the ‘*key informants*’), 14 in school spaces, 12 in places of entertainment (cafes, sweet shops) and 6 in workplaces (bar, farmland, office).

<sup>8</sup> # number # : indicates the code of the school, city or village.

<sup>9</sup> In the excerpts from the interviews the linguistic idioms have been maintained as have the transcription symbols for the rendering of the paralinguistic components, e.g. ‘::’, ‘.hhh’, ‘(1.0)’, ‘(.)’, ‘(( ))’, ‘\_’,

<sup>10</sup> The participant’s pseudonym and the line number from the transcribed interview (numbering unit by speaker).

➤ *The presence of other people*: The presence of other people in the interview is usually avoided, unless it is the only means of data collection (Roulston, 2010). We aimed not to have a third person in the interview so as not to upset the communication with the participant. When briefing the participants we explained that the rules of the research require that others are not present and we politely asked the 'key informant' to leave before the interview began. However, with nine participants we employed a more flexible tactic and accepted the presence of the 'key informant'. Five interviewees wanted him present in order to be interviewed. Four demonstrated intense anxiety and asked him to stay as they were very nervous. The presence of the 'key informant' functioned positively for the quality of the interviews since the participants spoke more comfortably and rarely left questions unanswered.

➤ *The recording*: The recording of the interview had many advantages but the use of a voice recorder may scare some of the participants, make them more hesitant, and the discussion may veer off track (Hadley, 2017). Quite a number appeared to feel uncomfortable with the voice recorder. The women were more hesitant: *'I'm ignorant about those things', 'I don't know how to talk properly', 'my voice doesn't sound nice', 'and if I say something I shouldn't'*. Typical was the anxiety of a married woman who said at the end of the interview: *'Don't put it on the internet because my husband is on all day long and he'll recognize my voice'*. Our clarifications regarding the purpose of the recording, the transcription procedure, the opportunity for them to read the transcribed texts and make changes usually set them at ease.

Despite our explanations, four women appeared very worried and so that they didn't cancel the interviews, we ended up recording them in writing. As three of the four were Roma, cancellation or insistence on recording would have created a negative atmosphere in the settlement. Bryman claims that the interview should be written if the participant refuses to be recorded because even so, useful information will emerge (Bryman, 2012). Glaser was not a supporter of tape-recording (Hadley, 2017, p. 79), believing that the details interrupted the rush of thought and derailed the researcher. He claimed that the researcher should learn *'to become a good notetaker'* (Puddephatt, 2007, p. 8).

Recording may have been a problem for many participants but for some it was attractive. They turned towards the tape recorder, looked serious and changed the tone of their voice. Those who had an 'accusatory discourse' did the same. 25 year-old Herodotus had hopes that the interview would be made public. *'Why don't you play it on the radio'*, he asked. In the Roma settlement, the tape recorder worked positively, perhaps because the residents believed that their problems would be heard *'higher up'*. Before the end of the interview, 35 year-old Phidias added:

*I would like to:: add:: for society to help us a little bit more [...] to::for them to try to get the Roma children to go to school [...] The ma::yor (2.0), Bravo! People at that level. (Phidias, lines 460, 466 & 470).*

### **Consequences on the interview quality**

Kvale (1996) puts forward six interview evaluation criteria, since interview quality is of major importance for data production. The first criterion which greatly concerns us, has to do with *'The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific and relevant answers from the interviewee'* (Kvale, 1996, pp. 144-145). Regarding this criterion we encountered the following problems:

➤ *Narrative difficulty*: Most participants narrated experiences from their school life with relative ease. They described their feelings, connected events or behaviours and evaluated their effects on their lives. However, a number didn't have such skills or were hesitant and gave short answers. This was observed more with the Roma and the younger participants, 18-22 years old. Since short answers don't offer much information during the analysis, Lune and Berg (2017) propose three techniques for dealing with the problem: i) The *'uncomfortable silence'* technique, in other words, the extended silence that follows a one word answer from the

interviewee, in which the interviewer gives the interviewee time to think, to contemplate and to give additional information. ii) The ‘*echoing*’ technique based on the idea that the respondent must feel that the interviewer is listening to him and understands him. The researcher paraphrases the interviewee’s words, sending the message that he is listening to him and encouraging him to continue. iii) The ‘*let people talk*’ technique which refers to respect for the interviewee’s rhythm of speech (Lune & Berg, 2017, pp. 87-88).

In order to get the interviewees to express their thoughts and feelings, we resorted to additional active listening techniques, familiar in Counselling, such as that of being ‘*minimal encouragers*’ of the interviewees by using lectical expressions or brief utterances (e.g. uh, yes, tell me more), ‘*summarizing*’ and ‘*reflection of feeling*’ (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2018, pp. 136-137, 155).

➤ *The issue of the trustworthiness of the data:* The discussion on the value of interview data is crucial. It could also be a question of how the researcher knows that the participants are being honest with him. This is a question that is related to the ‘*validity*’ of the data (Kiprianos & Christodoulou, 2015) and by extension to the quality<sup>11</sup> of the research.

According to Denscombe (2014) the researcher can double-check information or events but he cannot verify the participants’ feelings and experiences. The researcher is not a ‘*mind reader*’ but can and should ensure the ‘*credibility*’<sup>12</sup> of the data by using techniques such as ‘*triangulation*’, or ‘*respondent validation*’, the ‘*plausibility check*’ and the ‘*search for themes*’, in order to understand that something doesn’t sound right with what the respondents say (Denscombe, 2014, pp. 200-201). In brief, ‘*credibility*’ has to do with the extent to which the researchers ‘*can demonstrate that their data are accurate and appropriate*’. These techniques do not provide any guarantees but rather ‘*reassurances that the qualitative data have been produced and checked in accord with good practice*’ and on this basis ‘*the credibility of the data*’ will be judged (Denscombe, 2014, p. 297).

In our research we did not apply ‘*triangulation*’, such as checking the school records because the process for securing permission from the Hellenic Data Protection Authority (HDPA) was time-consuming and uncertain. In any case the research focuses on the actors’ experiences, on the way they experienced their dropping out of school and the consequences that had on their life. It focuses on their feelings, the interpretations they give to the phenomenon and to how these affected their action. To maximise the ‘*credibility*’ of the interview data we sought the commitment of the participants in two ways. Firstly, we chose the ‘*key informants*’ carefully as they constituted the safety valve for the ‘*accuracy and appropriateness*’ of the participants’ basic information. We briefed them analytically about the research and asked them to use ‘*subtle means of persuasion which, [...]. Do bring into question the degree to which the consent can be treated as completely voluntary*’ (Denscombe, 2010, p. 70).

Secondly, prior to each interview we had a long discussion with the participant, because discussion is a ‘*rapport building tool*’ (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 86). At the first meeting we talked about general matters, we then briefed him about the purpose of the research and the

<sup>11</sup> Researchers don’t agree on evaluation criteria for research quality. Some adopt criteria that originate in quantitative research (validity, reliability) with the necessary adaptations. Others adopt Lincoln and Cuba’s two alternative criteria (trustworthiness, authenticity). The criterion of ‘*trustworthiness*’ is made up of four separate criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability. The first, *credibility* recognizes the multiplicity of descriptions of the social world. Acceptance of a particular description is determined by whether it is feasible and convincing, something that the researcher ensures with techniques like: respondent validation, triangulation (Bryman, 2012, p. 390).

<sup>12</sup> The founders of GT, Glaser and Strauss, used the term ‘*credibility*’ in the sense of ‘*believable*’ rather than ‘*valid*’. J. Corbin who worked with Strauss and continued his work avoided the terms ‘*validity*’ and ‘*reliability*’ because they have ‘*quantitative implications*’ and preferred ‘*credibility*’ which shows ‘*that findings are trustworthy and believable*’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pp. 345-346).

interview procedure. We were in no hurry to carry out the interview and highlighted his contribution. This tactic proved to be effective, as only three potential participants weren't interviewed in the end. In addition, it increased the participants' interest in the research and made them more talkative. The field notes and the transcribed interviews reveal that most of the participants spoke about all the issues with honesty. In fact, most of them requested feedback at the end of the interview, asking: 'Did I do well?', 'I hope I helped you because I don't know many of the letters in the alphabet'. In the words of a 25 year-old single mother:

*You didn't put me in a difficult position. [...] No, it's just that I think that what I have been through:: hhh if you continue with it ((she means the research)) and others see it they won't make the same mistakes I made. (Ariti, line 370 & 372).*

We did however encounter problems with incomplete information from a number of participants regarding the grade on their primary school leaving certificate. Of the 45 who completed their primary education, 18 were not clear on the matter of the grade. 11 answered 'how am I supposed to remember that now?' or 'I'm not sure, I don't want to lie to you'. 3 gave two grades, adding 'I'm not entirely sure' and 4 gave grades incompatible with the grading system in effect when they left school. So as not to put them in a difficult position, and affect the progress of the interview, we said 'never mind, you might remember it later' and moved on to the next question. If this didn't work, at the end of the interview we politely asked them to find their leaving certificate and said that when we met again for the 'respondent validation' of the interview transcript we could fill it in as it would help with the thoroughness of the interview. If they didn't want to read the transcribed interview, we asked them to inform us by phone. This tactic worked since 11 of the 18 completed or corrected the grade. 10 had had a low grade (6-7 or C-B) and one had an excellent grade (A).

## RESPONSES AND PRACTICES

To respond to the problems mentioned above, we adopted the stance of *universalism*, according to which ethical principles should never be violated for any reason (Bryman, 2012). In sociological research ethics is mainly linked to the following issues: a) that of informed consent, b) that of non-deception, c) that of not causing injury to the participants, d) that of the protection of privacy. We encountered the following problems regarding these issues:

1) *Informed consent form*: Informed consent is the cornerstone of research ethics. It is founded on the principle that participants in research should not only consent in writing but also understand what they are agreeing to (Denscombe, 2014). In this way values are safeguarded, and first and foremost, anonymity and the protection of private life are assured (Marzano, 2012). Prior to the interview, we gave the participant one of the two signed copies of the informed consent form, on which the researchers' details, the title of the research, its purpose, the framework for its conduct, the desired scientific benefits, the criteria for the choice of participants, the voluntary nature of participation, the duration and themes of the interview, the right to withdraw, the choice of pseudonym and the assurance of confidentiality, the recording and the handling of the recorded files were laid out. Consequently, the participant had a full picture of the research. However, written forms of consent sometimes increase people's reluctance rather than dispel it (Bryman, 2012) and create unhelpful barriers for the researchers (Hadley, 2017).

The informed consent form created two problems prior to the interview. Some felt uncomfortable due to the difficulties they faced with reading. To get them out of this difficult position, we read and explained the form that they had in their hands (Hennink, 2017). The second difficulty had to do with the signing of the form. After the briefing we asked the

participant, if he had agreed to be interviewed, to sign the second copy, which was the researcher's. The Roma signed willingly, because they thought that it was important that they received some proof of participation and said that they would keep it safe. However, some were suspicious of having to sign, an attitude that jeopardized the trust which constitutes a valuable resource for the researcher in his relationship with the participants (Marzano, 2012). The problem was overcome by moving the signing of the informed consent form to the end of the interview. The participants were more comfortable with this and signed easily. Naturally, at the beginning of the interview we asked them to state that they had been briefed about the research and that they consented to the interview being recorded.

2) *Pseudonym*: The protection of the privacy of the participants concerns anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymity refers to the concealing of their names and confidentiality to not presenting evidence that would reveal their identities (Lune & Berg, 2017). In our research, we ensured confidentiality with the use of pseudonyms and the codifying of schools, villages and cities. Prior to the interview we asked the participants to choose a pseudonym from a list of names that we had ready (Bickerstaff, 2010), mainly ancient Greek names. The pseudonym was noted on both copies of the informed consent form and deleted from the list. The pseudonym was used in the interview, in the transcription and in the final report where the participants can recognize themselves but the readers cannot (Grinyer, 2002; Ogden, 2008).

The participants reacted to the pseudonyms in a variety of ways. A third of them willingly chose a pseudonym. Another third seemed uninterested in doing so. They chose one but stated that they didn't mind being interviewed using their real name. The procedure for the choice of the pseudonym created a pleasant atmosphere and relaxed the interviewees as they recognized important individuals from the ancient world and made various comments. However, for the other third of the participants the pseudonym caused some worry. Our clarifications calmed the fears of most and they chose a pseudonym. However, three (two of whom were Roma) firmly refused and kept their own names. In addition, Roma from a large settlement completely refused to participate due to the pseudonyms as '*there was something suspicious about them*' according to the '*key informant*'.

The pseudonym facilitated the participation of some individuals, but made more difficult the participation of others, mainly Roma. Wanting to keep their own names could be attributed to their hope for some gain from their participation (Ogden, 2008; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Grinyer states that with the pseudonym the participants may '*feel that they lose their ownership*' of the data' (Grinyer, 2002). Besides the pseudonyms, we also used software to codify the names of schools, cities, villages and settlements and thus further ensure confidentiality. During the transcription the names that the participants mentioned were replaced with the unique code, making '*deductive disclosure*' from the combination of the pseudonym with other evidence impossible (Kaizer, 2012, p. 457). We briefed the participants analytically regarding the anonymity procedure and assured them that no name would be recorded on the transcribed text or in the final report. Their understanding of the procedure facilitated the interview because the interviewees spoke more freely.

3) *Non deception*: Deception of the participants may be '*authorized deception*' or '*non-authorized*'. In the former, the participant is briefed and agrees to not learn details of the research (Robson & McCartan, 2016). In the latter, the researcher presents the research as something different to what it really is (Bryman, 2012). Although the informed consent form mentioned the framework for the conduct of the interview, two problems emerged. Firstly, some participants believed that the research was connected to European programmes and could be of benefit to their group. Euclid, speaking of the emotions he felt during the interview, said:

*I was moved and saddened to tell you the truth hhh but it's a nice feeling. [...] because I've told somebody that I believe:: will bring, will bring::, will bring something for us Roma (1.5). That's why it's nice for me (smiles with satisfaction) (Euclid, line 508).*

For our part, we made it clear that the research is not funded, is of social value and is not directed at specific groups.

Secondly, at the end of the interview some participants asked us to find them work, believing that we have access to various sectors. In answer we reminded them of the voluntary nature of participation and stressed to the 'key informants' that they be clear that participation does not go hand in hand with some trade-off.

4) *Not causing injury to the participants*: This refers to the protection of the participants in the research from every kind of injury (physical, emotional, psychological) (Lune & Berg, 2017). Research on student dropout doesn't pose any obvious physical danger for the participants. However, it is possible that some may think that incriminating information about them may come to light (Denscombe, 2014). Two participants gave details of their parents' delinquent behaviour. We politely reminded them that the object of our research was not their parents' troubles and we asked them to focus on how their parents' behaviour affected their school career. In this way we protected them from potential physical injury and avoided 'undue intrusion' into their life (Denscombe, 2014).

While our research is not concerned with sensitive personal data, emotional dangers cannot be ruled out. The interaction that takes place during the interview may have consequences for the participants, such as anxiety and changes in their self-image (Kvale, 1996). A number of participants had low self-esteem, feeling disadvantaged regarding their educational level and used derogatory phrases:

*I couldn't get a grasp on the letters:: my head couldn't make sense, I don't know* (Diogenes, line 200).

*Since I couldn't learn the letters, why go?' ((shrugs shoulders)) [...] I wanted to get a certificate (1.0) from high school [...] not to be:: a total bonehead* (Epicurus, lines 242 & 390).

*Yes ((he means he had difficulties)). And emotionally (1.0), because:: you feel an emptiness::: [...] Yes you feel that ::: you are lesser. ((displays anxiety))* (Phaedra, lines 182 & 184).

For the research to go smoothly, we wanted the participants to feel better. To allay their feelings of guilt, during the briefing we presented the extent of student dropout and stressed that a lot of people drop out of school.

Some participants, mostly women, were strongly moved during the interview as they recalled unpleasant school and family experiences or spoke about the difficulties they face in their life:

*We went to school on empty stomachs (1.0 (...)) Hunger is::: ((he becomes emotional)) [...] The settled ones ((non-Roma)), yes, because we are all people, would eat their snacks, while we didn't eat and stayed in the corner and cried. You see then (1.0), it is a very difficult thing, that ((tears well up))* (Euclid, lines 130 & 424).

*For a long time I thought that I was living well. But, I wasn't:: living. Because I didn't know (.) beyond that. Hhh [...] I thought I was only good for that (1.0) to bring up children ((emotion)), housework and work in the fie::lds and with the anim::als* (Nefeli, lines 464 & 472).

We didn't discourage the participants from expressing their feelings but we were especially careful with our reactions and took care to maintain the research nature of the interview. 'Interviewers', point out Knox & Burkard (2009, p. 571), 'must ensure that they are keeping the boundaries between their roles as researchers and clinician'. When we realized that a participant was focusing on an event which created intense emotional weight we changed the

subject (Knox & Burkard, 2009; Roulston, deMarrais, & Lewis, 2003). However we were forced to politely cut short one interview before all the topics had been exhausted. Although it was some time since 48 year-old Phoebe's husband had died, she often cried, and focussed on the loss and connected all the events to that.

In general, we made sure that the interviews ended on a positive note so as not to finish abruptly (Charmaz, 2006). To end the interview we asked the participants if they felt they had been put in a difficult position. All of them said that they hadn't and stated that they were happy to have been interviewed despite remembering unpleasant events. Some who had been hesitant in the beginning stated that they had spoken about things that they had never spoken about before. Indeed, 39 year-old Valentina told the *'key informant'*: *'that interview was the best present you have given me'*.

## CONCLUSIONS

Many of the problems that arose in our research could appear in any qualitative research. Some have to do with our methodological choices and the peculiarities of the object of the research. The greatest difficulty concerned the production of quality data. The location of individuals who had dropped out of school and urging them to state their personal experiences as well as to contemplate on them, are at the core of the problems we encountered.

The use of *'personal networks'* proved effective. It is perhaps the most suitable means for the location of participants when the target population of the research is not registered anywhere. The presence of many *'key informants'* of various ages and professions at many of the key points in the research area proved to be important since not everyone displays the necessary interest, nor does everyone have the same communication skills to persuade the reference population, and thirdly, when the researcher has a number of choices, he can make use of those who have access to the individuals that the analysis suggests.

The recruitment of participants was more difficult than initially estimated, since the target-population was not especially willing to talk. The reasons for this were judged to be the lack of material incentives, suspicions surrounding the researcher, the technique of the interview, the fear of discoveries being made, negative school experiences and the low educational level. The participation of Roma was even more difficult as in many cases approval had to be obtained from other family members.

Data collection proved in the end to be very time consuming, since we needed almost a year to carry out 52 interviews. We adopted a flexible schedule because we didn't know how many interviews or how much time we would need. Flexibility was also needed with the research budget since the dispersion of the population increased its cost.

Finding individuals who would agree in the first place to be interviewed is the first step in the research. From the moment a *'key informant'* suggested an individual up until the interview took place, we had to overcome a number of problems. One of those was the choice of a suitable space. We wanted the participants to feel comfortable and safe and we respected their choice. For the same reason we accepted the presence of the *'key informant'* during the interview when the participants requested it.

Recording was an additional problem. Few appeared to be untroubled by the tape recorder. Most were hesitant but explanations regarding the usefulness of the recording and the assurances that nobody other than us would hear the interview reduced their fears. Some refused right up until the end and the interview was written.

Maintaining ethical rules created problems. Signing the informed consent form prior to the interview made many participants uncertain. Moving the signing to the end of the interview solved the problem. The pseudonym too created resistance in some who, despite the

explanations, insisted on keeping their own name. Our flexible attitude in relation to these issues was of double benefit: Firstly, the vast majority of those recommended by the ‘key informants’ were interviewed. Secondly, they felt more comfortable during the interview. The thorough briefing of the participants was decisive in dealing with the problems that came up both before and during the interview.

A number of participants didn’t have sufficient narrative skills so as to provide information on their school experiences. Through the employment of active listening techniques they enriched their discourse and expressed themselves more freely. So as not to expose them to physical or emotional danger, we encouraged them not to reveal sensitive information about themselves or people close to them, which was not directly related to the topic.

The quality of the data doesn’t only depend on the richness of the information but also on its credibility. For this reason, we spent time on the briefing so that the participants understood the importance of the research and their own contribution to it. Through our behavior, our aim was that they should answer without especial pressure. The participants covered all the topics but some had difficulty remembering the grade on their primary school leaving certificate. While the effect of the passage of time cannot be ruled out, we believe that they avoided the question out of embarrassment. That’s why we gave them the opportunity to modify their answers during the respondent validation. Most of them did so.

From the discussion above two questions arise: Why did the participants agree to be interviewed without material incentives? Was their information credible?

External incentives facilitate participation in research but many participate for their own reasons. To succeed, the researcher must prepare his research well, believe in it and communicate effectively. We tried in our briefings to arouse the interest of the participants in the research so that they would devote time to talk about their experiences. We presented the extent of student dropout in the area to them and explained to them analytically the aims of the study and its potential benefits.

Obviously not all the participants agreed to be interviewed out of altruism. Some participated to please either the ‘key informant’ or us. Some tried to impress, because they were managing better *financially* than those who studied and they defied their teachers’ predictions. Others saw the research as an opportunity to express their complaints about teachers or parents as well as to set out demands. A number of participants, mainly Roma, thought that their voice would be heard and they proposed benefits as a way of eradicating student dropout and training programmes to tackle unemployment.

As far as the second question is concerned, most spoke spontaneously about almost all the topics and rarely made contradictory statements. Most set out suggestions for alleviating student dropout which were compatible with the reasons they mentioned had led them themselves to drop out of school. In addition, at the end of the interview, most wanted to know if they had done well and if they had been of help. The fact that a number of them didn’t remember their school performance doesn’t mean that their interviews are pointless, even if it was their intention to hide this piece of information. When people speak they do not only express their opinions but attempt to ‘locate’ themselves in a way that corresponds to the expectations they suppose others have of them (Hammersley, 2013). Nor did they come to the interview with the intention of deceiving the researcher. Concealing their grade is perhaps an attempt to protect their image and their reliability. Those who showed off in the interview about their successful professional career and great satisfaction with their life, perhaps believed that if they mentioned their low grade the researcher would lose respect for them and their words.

The participants’ comments on their past have limitations that we must accept. There are things that the participants don’t remember or don’t want to share and the interviewer won’t know. The interviewees keep things to themselves, enrich their stories or silence certain details.

In any case, the interview is their experience, their speech is valuable and their words constitute a challenge for the researcher in his attempt to understand their world and interpret it.

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