Thematic Article

Hungarian Educational Research Journal
2019, Vol. 9(1) 9–29
© The Author(s) 2019
https://akademiai.com/loi/063
Akadémiai Kiadó
DOI:10.1556/063.9.2019.1.2

"They assume that I don't really want education for my children": Roma mothers' experiences with the Norwegian educational system

Kari Hagatun[1]

Abstract

Exploring a group of Roma mothers' experiences regarding their children's education in Norway, this article adopts an ethnographic approach. One key theme emerging is how the mothers actively negotiate how to prioritize education and, at the same time, prioritize the core values and practices they perceive as vital for "being Roma." The findings challenge a strong metanarrative in the national public debate, portraying Roma parents as a homogenous group unwilling and unable to procure education for their children. The findings are considered in light of the current Norwegian educational policy toward the Roma minority children. Particularly, the article addresses how the mothers' experiences demonstrate a need to challenge current understandings of the concept of *inclusion*. It argues that inclusion, as it is understood and practiced within the Norwegian educational system, entails a high degree of assimilation.

Keywords: Roma, educational policy, ethnography, negotiating strategies, critical theory

Introduction

In this article, I explore a group of Roma mothers' views on and experiences with education for their children in Norway.[2] The study adopts an ethnographic approach, drawing on fieldwork conducted in Oslo, the capital of Norway, during 2016–2017 with life story

---

[1] Department of Education, The University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway, Email address: Kari.Hagatun@uib.no, ORCID: 0000-0003-1341-5478

[2] In the following, "mothers/women" and "children/adolescents" will refer to persons belonging to the Roma national minority. "Community" will refer to the "Roma community."

Recommended citation format: Hagatun, K. (2019). "They assume that I don't really want education for my children": Roma mothers' experiences with the Norwegian educational system. *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*, *9*(1), 9–29. DOI:10.1556/063.9.2019.1.2

interviews and observant participation as main methods (Culhane, 2017). The article explores the mothers' negotiating strategies for dealing with social structures, which in turn structure how they relate to formal education for their children. Thus, the concepts of social structure and agency are used as analytical tools.

One key theme emerging is how the mothers actively negotiate how to prioritize education and, at the same time, prioritize the core values and practices they experience as vital for "being Roma." The findings nuance and challenge a strong metanarrative represented in the public national debate, portraying Roma parents as a homogenous group, both unwilling and unable to procure education for their children (Engebrigtsen, 2015; Hagatun, in press; Helakorpi, Lappalainen, & Mietola, 2018).

The findings are considered in light of current Norwegian educational policy, and address how the women's experiences demonstrate a need to challenge current understandings of the concept of inclusion in particular. I argue that inclusion, as currently practiced, entails a high degree of assimilation in Norwegian schools for Roma and other minorities.

Background

Roma in Norway

The group defined in Norwegian legislation as the national minority Roma includes some 700 individuals[3] and is organized in several extended families living in Oslo. The community belongs to the transnational group *Vlach*, which is said to possess a particularly strong identity as Roma and thus feels a strong responsibility to maintain the "correct" Roma way of life (Lidén, 1990). Although most adults are considered to speak both Norwegian and Romanés, the children speak mostly Romanés until they start school, indicating the strong oral position of the minority language within the community (Schall, 2017). The families traditionally travel abroad during spring, summer, and fall but have become gradually more sedentary (Engebrigtsen, 2015).

Although issues regarding Roma are hot research topics throughout Europe, limited research has been conducted in Norway (Hagatun, in press). Existing studies indicate that the life conditions of Roma in Norway align with the overall poor socioeconomic situation for Roma in the rest of Europe, with incessant problems related to education, poverty, housing, and health issues (Engebrigtsen & Lidén, 2010; The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2013). The group is subjected to extensive discrimination, and tends

[3] So-called "migrant Roma" and Roma who migrated from the former Yugoslavia to Norway in the 1990s are not defined as part of the Roma national minority. Because Norwegian law prohibits registration of ethnicity, the estimates of individuals included in the national minority group are uncertain.

to live segregated from Norwegian society as such (Rosvoll & Bielenberg, 2012; Rosvoll, Lien, & Brustad, 2015).

Educational situation

A telling story about the educational situation[4] of Roma in Norway is that only two or three individuals, throughout history, are said to have completed higher secondary education. Limited research focusing specifically on education, and national laws prohibiting registration of pupils' ethnicity, entail a lack of precise and updated knowledge on the group's educational attainment (Hagatun, in press). However, existing literature indicates consistent low school attendance and some cases in which children never attend school. Many, especially girls, drop out before the transition to lower secondary school and most adults are considered to be illiterate (Engebrigtsen, 2015; Engebrigtsen & Lidén, 2010; Hagatun & Westrheim, 2014; Lidén, 2005).

In educational research and the national public debate, Roma's strong wish to keep their traditions is argued to be a main obstacle to improve their educational attainment (Engebrigtsen, 2015; Helakorpi et al., 2018). Other explanations on the poor educational situation are found in the ways that schools interact with children and their parents, focusing on bullying and how pupils are not met according to needs and competences (Aarset & Lidén, 2017; Hagatun, in press). Thus, there is a pressing need for research providing nuanced and current knowledge about Roma's perspectives on education and future.

Methodology

In order to explore Roma mothers' experiences with formal education, I chose an exploratory ethnographic approach, drawing on data gathered through observant participation and life story interviews. Ethnographic methodology enables one to understand "how other people see their experience," thus focusing on learning from people, more than studying people (Spradley, 1979, p. 3), while the aim of life history work is to investigate the mediating role of culture and thus break the strangleholds of metanarratives that establish rules of identity, truth, and legitimacy (Chase, 2008).

Adopting a constructivist approach of understanding social realities, the research is positioned within an interpretive view of culture, not seen as a group's pattern of behavior, but as meanings shared by those who know them (Eisenhart, 2001). The study is situated within the critical research paradigm, aiming to improve "*life chances for individuals on the bottom of the social hierarchy*" (Hatch, 2002, p. 17).

[4] In this part of the article, "educational situation" refers to formal education or schooling.

Table 1. Fieldwork and material: An overview

Fieldwork and material: An overview	
Time and place	The article draws on several periods of fieldwork in Oslo in 2016–2017. During the first stages of fieldwork, I spent time at different venues where Roma gathered, like seminars, classes, meetings, and celebrations. In later stages, I spent time with families in their homes
Access	Prior research in the community demonstrated the importance of getting access by going through gatekeepers with a standing in the community. Thus, employees in a public service working closely with Roma facilitated initial access to the community, as they have done in prior fieldwork. In later stages of fieldwork access was negotiated in close collaboration with a Romanés-speaking research assistant
Participants	A total of 37 parents, children, and teachers have been interviewed as part of the study "The educational situation for Roma." In this article, interviews and field conversations with seven of the mothers serve as a focal point. The women were 23–47 years old, mothering one to six children
Methods	Observant participation and life story interviews were used as the main methods. I use the term "observant participation" instead of the more commonly used "participant observation," which has been criticized for positioning the researcher as active, observing subjects while participants become passive, observed objects. I turned to life-story interviews in order to conceive participants as narrators with stories to tell, rather than informants having the answers to researcher's questions
Material	The combination of involvement, observant participation, and life-story interviews provided a body of rich data, consisting of transcribed interviews and field notes
Process of analysis	By applying an inductive analytical approach – noting recurring patterns of meaning in the material – I developed thematic categories. These describe sets of factors, related to the educational system and the Roma community, that mothers experience as (a) supporting, and/or (b) hindering, while negotiating between prioritizing education and the core values and practices experienced as vital for "being Roma"

The article draws on periods of fieldwork in Oslo in 2016–2017. Interviews and field conversations with seven women serve as a focal point in this article (Table 1).

Ethical considerations

The critical approach demands radical ethics, always concerned about power and oppression (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007). When a researcher representing a white middle class majority seeks insight into a minority's situation, there is a risk of letting

stereotypical, preexisting perceptions of the group influence the research. Culturalization means that complex, social conditions are excessively explained on basis of culture or ethnicity, disguising the real relationships between individuals and groups (Olgaç, 2006). This emphasizes the need of treating the participants as individuals who actively create meaning in their life.

In later stages of fieldwork, a Roma woman who worked as a school assistant was employed as research assistant. Through our close cooperation, I got access to arenas like homes and weddings, and by involving myself in families' daily lives, I got knowledge on a more personal level. This involvement led to an increased understanding of the social problems experienced by the Roma families I came to know. As argued by Setti (2017), personal involvement is important in order to reach a deeper understanding of, and to work against, the social injustice suffered by this group.

When ethnicity is involved, the confidentiality of the participants is of utmost importance. To prevent speculation about "who is who" within a small, close-knit community, I focus on narratives by referring to interview 1, interview 2, etc. (Hagatun & Westrheim, 2014; Olgaç, 2006). Confidentiality is also ensured by not giving detailed descriptions of the participants' individual backgrounds.

All the procedures are approved by the Norwegian Data Protection Official (NSD).

Structures and Agency

The concepts of social structure and agency are used as analytical tools. There is a danger of regarding social structures as "fixed" rather than always changing and changeable. They are experienced differently by people and groups influenced by past and present individual and collective experiences. Moreover, structures are experienced as constraining and/or enabling. Here, social structures are understood as different factors, mainly within the educational system and within the Roma community, which shape the limits of constraints and possibilities experienced by the mothers. Structures become visible through descriptions of what factors mothers experience as constraining and/or enabling while negotiating.

The ways in which researchers conceive agency "*have implications for the understanding of personhood, causality, action, and intention*" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). Ethnographic research should avoid conceptualizing agency as a synonym for either free will or resistance (Ahearn, 2001). Here, agency is understood as "*the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act*" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). When researching power relations, the agents who represent the educational system are often portrayed as the dominant party with their schemes and projects, while the minority is portrayed as the dominated part. Using the concept of agency helps us to see beyond such simple understanding of systematic

asymmetry and to recognize Roma mothers as able to react, formulating and enacting their projects in the world. According to Ortner (2011), we need to describe such reactions in ways that go beyond contextualizing them in their relations to the system. "*It is about people having desires that grow out of their own structures of life, including very centrally their own structures of inequality, and it is about ethnographic writing that brings these to the fore*" (Ortner, 2011, p. 81). By using the concept "negotiating," I amplify the understanding of Roma mothers as active agents.

In the following, the main findings will be presented, exploring different negotiating strategies mothers have developed by dealing with social structures.

Mothers Prioritizing Formal Education – And the Rest of the Community

> "*I have a son in higher secondary school. I have chosen that he will get an education and he will have a life!*" (Interview 10)

This mother clearly relates to schooling as part of a formal education qualifying for work when describing her ambitions on behalf of her 17-year-old son. Other parents and children often refer to her son as the one "who is in higher secondary school." During fieldwork, I found a group of seven women who prioritize formal education for their children, both in terms of ambition and practice. Other parents seem to prioritize schooling to a certain degree – learning to read and write. Some parents explain that they would prefer that their children get formal education but find this difficult to achieve.

Differences in how parents relate to formal education should not lead to a false dichotomy, regarding each parent as either "willing and able" or "unwilling and unable" to procure formal education for their children. Instead, the findings demonstrate that practices and utterances from individuals must be regarded as positions on a continuum, which indicate that parents can be able but unwilling, OR willing but unable, OR unable and unwilling, OR able and willing.

In the following, I will refer to the seven mothers who serve as a focal point in this article, as "the active mothers." The mothers are between 23 and 47 years old, have one to six children attending school, and they know each other through family ties.

The finding, that a group of mothers clearly prioritize formal education, might be questioned methodologically. As Engebrigtsen (2015, p. 123) proclaims, the response from the Roma community has long been double-sided; they say that they want education for their children but in practice the children do not attend school. However, the ethnographic approach allowed me to witness, both through observant participation in the schools their children attended and through interviews with the children and their teachers, the various ways in which the active mothers prioritized education.

The mothers' active approach was also evident in their detailed narratives on daily routines, contact with teachers, and school activities in which the children attend.

The Mothers' Educational and Occupational Background

Only two of the seven mothers have attended school on a regular basis until they were 18 and 14 years old – one of them in Sweden. The others typically were enrolled in school for 2–3 years, actively attending for only a few months. None has schooling leading up to formal occupational expertise.

While other mothers in the community take care of their homes and family full time, the active mothers work outside of home as mediators in schools and NGO's. They describe themselves and are described by others as holding central positions in the community.

It seems that the length of formal education among the active mothers does not seem essential to whether they prioritize formal education for their children, but that the amount of schooling they received feeds into their motivation in different ways. While the mothers with most formal education want their children to complete their education in ways they themselves did not, the mothers with almost no schooling want their children to have chances they themselves missed:

> "*It is so important that my child gets further. One day when she grows up, she can start a job because she has an education. If I compare my child to myself . . . I cannot . . . I cannot even think about it. That is the reason I do what I can to have my daughter in school. My child will go to school. She will not go through that . . . There is no way to explain . . . How can I say? To be ashamed . . .*" (Interview 2)

The mother, who was enrolled in one of the segregated schools for Roma pupils initiated by the state over several decades, compares her childhood experiences with her daughter's:

> "*Of course, we enjoyed being at that school, together with our siblings and cousins. Some of the things I see today, with my child. She has a lot of homework and tests and tasks. A lot! We did not do anything like that in school! We were just happy that we were allowed to do exactly what we wanted to while we were there. However, we did not get anything out of it, really. I think I can speak on behalf of all the people I know who went to that school. As adults, we lack . . . There are so many things we cannot do. We have to manage without, in one way or another. It would have been so much easier for us if the school had challenged us. However, they did not. Today I look at this differently than I did just ten years ago, I really do.*" (Interview 2)

Traditionally, it has been unusual for Roma women in Norway to work outside of the home or to have much contact with non-Roma society. Work experience outside the home seems to play a significant role in the active mothers' agency, as well as the type of work. The women express that they have learnt, through their work, to actively relate to society outside the Roma community and some even to read and write. How the work experience and being an active mother are interrelated becomes evident in this mother's story, which also illustrates how children are active agents of their own, negotiating many of the same structures as their mothers:

> "*Then I started to take courses in order to become a school assistant. I was a bit proud, but the best thing was that my daughter, who had started school then . . . She was very . . . 'What is your mother's occupation?' Because she got that question a lot. And she said: 'My mommy goes to school and will become a school assistant.' And at that time her mother could not write! (. . .) Now I work, and my daughter is like: 'My mother is not at home. When she goes to work, I go to school!'*" (Interview 2)

All parents in the study, including the active mothers, want their children to have a good family life and a happy marriage within the community. Thus, what separates the active mothers from other parents is that they actively negotiate both the Roma community and the educational system, aiming to maintain the Roma way of life, and at the same time, procure formal education for their children. The following will present their three main negotiating strategies: (a) to inform and challenge schools, (b) "doing school," and (c) to challenge children.

Negotiating Strategies

To inform and challenge schools

The mothers actively communicate with teachers and school leaders about their life and priorities as Roma parents, as well as worries and problems that they experience.

Most parents in the study find that schools lack basic knowledge about Roma's way of life and life conditions, not recognizing the troubles families experience with housing, often having to move and change schools because of financial problems or discrimination. Another example is that schools tend to regard children as bilingual, not recognizing that they only speak Romanés before they start school, expecting them to follow instructions and teaching in Norwegian. Parents also experience that teachers and headmasters do not understand why families have to travel on short notice, for example, to attend a funeral abroad. They seem to consider this as individual choices, while the parents portray such activities as "mandatory," being part of the community. Another example is that the school

system communicates core information to parents through letters and websites, not recognizing that most Roma parents are illiterate.

According to the active mothers, such lack of knowledge might hamper communication, but if they experience schools as willing to learn, the mothers can still build a good relationship with teachers and headmasters.

> "*I told the schools my daughter attended: 'When you are teaching about sexuality, my daughter has to stay at home or be placed in another class. My child cannot be taught this'. They did not respect that in the beginning. I have repeated it every year. Now, they know. I started informing them already in first grade, I did not know, so I started already then. Then I got a letter where they explained . . . They used the textbook 'Gaya', then. They explained that in the first grade they only learn about animals. How animals get children. Not about humans. And then it was ok.*" (Interview 5)

However, the mothers find it to be very difficult when schools' lack of knowledge is combined with prejudices and negative attitudes toward Roma. If the teachers do not expect Roma parents to prioritize schooling, then everything the active mothers do is judged according to this prejudice. When children are sick or the family has to travel on short notice, it is often interpreted as "not wanting to send children to school." When the mothers try to communicate that they prioritize school even though they do not always succeed in sending the children to school, they experience that the teacher suspects that they "are not telling the truth."

> "*I always have to prove that I want my children to get an education. It is so exhausting! They just assume that no Roma mother really wants to send their children to school. They do not see me as a person, just as a Roma . . .*" (Interview 3)

Several mothers have experienced firsthand that schools dominated by such negative attitudes have reported their worries to the Child Welfare Service instead of contacting the parents. In general, such schools are described as complying blindly with rules set by the school district, for example, by expelling Roma pupils after being absent for a certain period of time.

The schools seem to vary in how they deal with worries and problems communicated by parents. While other parents often change school or take the child out of school when experiencing serious difficulties, like bullying, the active mothers immediately contact teachers and headmasters, challenging them to put an end to the problem. If the active mothers learn that the school staff is doing their best, they upheld their trust in the school, even when problems are not solved at once:

> "*I called the school immediately! 'My daughter has come home crying several times, this has to end now! This boy cannot be allowed to hit my daughter. It is not allowed! If it does not stop, I have to change school!' The teacher told me that they tried their best, but that it was difficult. I was . . . But then I observed this boy, picking up my daughter from school. I got the impression that he was a bit . . . he had ADHD maybe? Then I told my daughter: 'This boy has an illness, so you should not blame him. He cannot help himself . . . '*" (Interview 3)

Support from schools is of utmost importance when parents and pupils experience threats and fear because of conflicts within the community. While the rest of the community often either leave Oslo or do not leave home during periods of conflicts, the active mothers try to negotiate these situations, aiming to send the children to school despite the danger this might represent. For example, they request the school to provide taxis for the children. To drive the children in recognizable cars is too dangerous in such periods. Mothers tell stories about being hit by other cars or having objects thrown in through car windows while driving.

The active mothers experience that some schools, acknowledging the severity of the situation, provide taxis.[5] Other schools do not understand or will not accommodate the need, and the mothers experience that their motives are questioned. Or that schools believe that parents can choose not to take part in a conflict, not recognizing that within the community individuals are identified as enemies or allies based on family ties.

Thus, active mothers describe the schools' level of knowledge about Roma as important, but the essential factor for a successful cooperation is that schools meet the mothers with interest, dignity, and positive expectations. Moreover, successful communication seems to depend on the schools' willingness to negotiate a "middle ground," finding solutions when the needs of parents and pupils do not comply with the "rules" set by the school district. For the active mothers, their ability to negotiate successfully with schools seems dependent on some knowledge about the system like what to expect, how to talk, and how and when to challenge.

"Doing school"

The second negotiating strategy is called "doing school" because of its focus on concrete practices showing how the active mothers implement routines in order to meet the expectations from the school system. Examples on such routines are getting the children in bed and up at set times, eating breakfast, and driving them to school. For instance, to eat

[5] Formally, it is not the schools that decide if taxi can be required; it is the municipality. However, in practice, the parents experience that these processes go through the local schools.

meals at fixed times is not a part of the traditional Roma life, as explained by a grandmother:

> "*You see, we eat when everyone is hungry, not because the time is this or that. When we wake up, we only drink coffee. To make breakfast is like . . . as if you gadze would have to start getting up in the middle of the night to make dinner!*" (Interview 7)

Thus, the mothers try to implement routines which are foreign to them and they describe great difficulties in trying to uphold such daily routines. A main challenge is that the rest of the Roma community does not live by the same routines. One mother tells:

> "*I often get visitors in the evening, and it is difficult because I cannot tell them to be quiet or to leave because my children have to go to bed. There are often lots of children coming. Then it becomes a bit chaotic, but I tell my girls: 'You have to get to bed now!' Because they have to get up at seven in the morning no matter what.*" (Interview 4)

The mothers also attempt to implement other routines, like doing homework. The success depends on the children's motivation. Few of the children report doing homework regularly, as they have other priorities after school. Since the children see that others in the community are not doing homework, the active mothers often find it difficult to motivate them.

Many families have reduced their travelling during the past decade, due to complex socioeconomic factors. There seems to be little basis for simple "less travelling leads to more schooling" – explanations when looking at the whole community. Yet, how and when the active mothers travel seems linked to the ambition of more schooling, as their families only travel abroad during school holidays. During the past years, several families have stayed at local campsites in Oslo in the weeks prior to summer holiday and mothers explain that they want the children to experience the "travel life" while attending school. This can be seen as a compelling example on the mothers' eagerness to negotiate between formal education and upholding the Roma way of life, although this form of "travelling" is not the same as the often economically motivated, traditional form of travelling.

A necessity for implementing and upholding routines and practices described above is that both parents agree to prioritize formal education. Still, in line with the traditional gender roles within the community, the active mothers are responsible for the day-to-day practices related to children, which for them includes upholding the routines necessary to negotiate schooling.

Since "doing school" means to live by routines they did not experience in their own childhood, and which do not align with the daily lives of the rest of the community, the mothers' struggle to implement such routines represents quite an extreme effort to align

with the school system. However, for the school system and the majority population, these routines appear as the natural way of living. Thus, the great efforts and costs this negotiating strategy represents in the lives of the mothers are recognized neither by the school system nor by the Roma community in which they live.

To challenge children

The third negotiating strategy is how active mothers negotiate with their children in order for them to get a formal education, while securing their future within the community.

One of the greatest fears expressed by all parents is that their children might break the rules regulating purity, *mahrime.* Especially for girls, there is no way to get clean after being intimate with a non-Roma and they might never get married within the community. Traditionally, parents limit such risk by removing children from school, especially girls in transition to lower secondary school. The active mothers try to limit the risk in other ways:

> "*When mothers get worried, they think that the only way to protect their daughters is to take them out of the situation [school]. However, I think that is wrong. If you really speak with your girls and explain to them: 'This is our tradition. That is the way I did it and the way your grandmother did it, it has always been done like this. This tradition is now for you to keep.' Because, there is no use just telling the girls, you also have to make them proud: 'You are what you are and no one can take it away from you.'*" (Interview 7)

Thus, although the active mothers express the same level of fear as other parents, having the same ambitions for their children's future within the community, they choose to negotiate the situation instead of avoiding it. Several mothers sometimes question their own priorities, expressing a certain ambiguity:

> "*Sometimes I think, 'Oh my god, did I do something wrong asking my son to get an education? He might get into something bad!' Then I blame myself. Why did I not take him out of school and let him live as the other boys in the family? They are 16-17 years old now and learn to drive and work with their fathers in the family firm. Maybe I did something wrong? If he ends up doing something bad because I have been too Norwegian . . .*" (Interview 6)

Critical comments from other parents nurture their doubt:

> "*There is a group back there who watch everything you do. A reputation can spread so fast and destroy the life of my daughter. As a mother, you are not allowed to destroy the life of your daughter.*" (Interview 5)

Still, the mothers choose to continue negotiating, trusting their ability to influence their children.

> "*The others can say what they want. I do not care about everything people say. I have become a very strong person. (. . .) I decide for my children. I do not need others to tell me what I can do and what I cannot do.*" (Interview 8)

The support and sense of community with other mothers making the same choice seem to be of utmost importance. The active mothers also value support and admiration from others in the community who want to make the same choices but find themselves unable to do so.

Making plans about the content, length, and outcome of education together with their children, stressing the future possibilities formal education might provide another way mothers negotiate with their children:

> "*I asked my son, 'What are your strengths? What do you enjoy?' 'To speak with people', he said. And his style . . . he loves to dress smart. Then we explored, 'Are you a good salesperson? Maybe you can become a broker, they earn good money'. He thought about it and watched some television-shows about American brokers. He liked it. He liked the way they talked. In a way, it all fell into place for him. 'I want to become a broker! These people have a good life. They earn a lot, and have smart cars, driving around! It is not a difficult job! It is talking with people.' He has decided to become a broker and he will continue to strive for it. And he has our permission to do so.*" (Interview 10)

Observing and interviewing the active mothers' children, I find that while some share their parents' conception of formal education as good and thrive in school, others do not, although they attend school most days. They find school boring and would rather live as other children in the community. Boys in particular seem to value opportunities to earn money at an early age. Both boys and girls refer to relatives who have succeeded without education as important role models. The active mothers express that it is difficult to negotiate with children who do not thrive in school, an experience also non-Roma parents can recognize. Thus, the uniqueness of the active mothers' situation is that their unmotivated children get support from other adults and children in the community, sharing their belief that formal education is a waste of time.

Discussion

Social structures

Through the descriptions of the active mothers' negotiating strategies, social structures emerge in relation to the school system and the community. One structure has been

created by the manner in which society has historically organized schooling for Roma pupils, illustrating how a history of segregation, assimilation, and oppression influences the situation today. The organization of schools according to time and space and the "white" curriculum taught in schools are other significant structures, as well as how school is linked to other institutions in the welfare state, such as the Child Welfare Services. Moreover, we see the importance of broader societal structures, such as Roma's socioeconomic situation and discrimination they are subjected to. The conflicts within the community, which structure where and when individuals can move, can be understood in relation to the groups' position as excluded from society. "*Structural violence – the violence of poverty, hunger, social exclusion and humiliation – inevitably translates into intimate and domestic violence*" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004, p. 1).

Related to the community, we see the significance of the conceptions of "good parenthood" and the gendered roles of men and women preserving the identity and traditions of the group, exemplified in the practice of keeping the teenagers away from school (Wekker, 2016). The fact that children do not necessarily share their mothers' ambitions about formal education illustrates that the children should be regarded as active agents of their own, negotiating many of the same structures as their mothers.

The agency of women

To fulfill their agency, it is not enough for the active mothers to decide, or be motivated, to prioritize formal education. They must also have the personal resources to trust their own ability as parents, and to implement foreign practices which align with school routines and expectations. I find that the active mothers know each other well and the support from women sharing the same priorities seems to be of utmost importance for each woman's ability to maintain her project despite all challenges. The creation of a group enables the forming of a new habitus, making it easier to negotiate both the social pressure they experience as women in the Roma community and expectations from the school system.

The informal education, which active mothers obtain through their work outside the home, feeds into their agency. When I first encountered some of these women back in 2012, they had just started working but have since then evolved into increasingly professional ethno-politicians. The women negotiate how to maintain what is seen as traditional gender roles within the community, while seeking positions that are not compliant with the portrayed traditional role of Roma women. Instead of viewing this shift as "breaking" the roles, adopting an essentialized gender perspective, I argue that the way these women are able to negotiate such seemingly contradictory positions illustrates that what are perceived as acceptable norms for motherhood and fatherhood – for

womanhood and manhood – are relational, thus always negotiable and negotiated (Narayan, 1997).

We see that the active mothers maintain the same core ambitions for their children as the rest of the community, to secure the children a good future within the community, maintaining its core values. Thus, the active mothers do not give up on the traditional Roma way of living but try to find ways to negotiate formal education into this type of life. The contradictions they experience might lead them to question their own priorities toward formal education; their agency becomes intrapersonal, holding conflicting ideas, and intentions (Ahearn, 1999). We can also see this ambiguity as representing the complex relationship between informal and formal education. Traditionally, informal education has been recognized by Roma as the way to give children and adolescents the tools they need in adult life. The active mothers seem to recognize a decrease in the sustainability of Romas' traditional ways to earn a living and therefore seek to procure formal education. This ambition complies with the accepted norms in the Norwegian society, which portray formal education as a necessity for all. Still, by actively challenging the schools in order to protect core values in the Roma community, the mothers risk breaking the norms for what the majority and the school system perceive as "responsible parenthood."

In this article, by describing structures as "constraining" or "enabling," I indicate a normative conception of formal education as "good" to achieve. An opposite normative standpoint could be to explore how the educational system enables or constrains possibilities to maintain the traditional Roma way of life, in which informal education has been valued over formal education. Such opposite normative standpoints illustrate that researchers are in a position to choose between different values, and that the values we choose to underpin our research are not necessarily the values shared by all those we do our research on (Becker, 1967).

In many ways, the active mothers always come too short; they never fully meet the expectations from the schools, nor the expectations from the community. Therefore, children who come to school most days and who stay beyond primary school are often the result of their mothers' tremendous effort to negotiate, an effort seldom recognized by the school system.

The active mothers stress that the schools must increase their knowledge about Roma, and more importantly, that schools must be willing and able to negotiate "a middle ground." This often implies that teachers and headmasters have to look beyond school regulations and laws, and how these are practiced in the rest of the school district.[6]

[6] The city of Oslo, where most Roma live, is known for its strict school regulations.

In the following, I will look into the educational policy and practice, discussing how Roma's educational situation represents an opportunity for change.

Educational policy and practice

By acknowledging Roma status as a national minority, and Romanés as a national minority language, Norway undertook to promote equal educational opportunities for Roma and to promote Romanés as a national minority language (Council of Europe, 1992, 1995). Still, Norway has not developed specific national legislation supplementing these international commitments and there is no mention of Roma in the Education Act or in the National Curriculum (Helakorpi et al., 2018). Even if recognized as a national minority language, Romanés still lacks legal foundation in the Norwegian legislation and Roma children are not recognized as monolingual Romanés-speaking in schools (Schall, 2017).

Political initiatives[7] aiming to improve the groups' educational situation have historically emphasized adult education, and has thus consistently been criticized for lacking the children's perspective. Both the Council of Europe (2015) and the European Commission have repeatedly solicited the Norwegian government to give increased focus on the problems facing Roma pupils in school (Norwegian Ministry of Government Administration, 2010). Over the past few years, there has been a slight shift toward focusing on the children. There is now a special measure within the municipality of Oslo, offering support to Roma pupils, their parents, and teachers.[8] However, such affirmative action is still the exception in schools with Roma children. This is in line with the current Norwegian minority educational policy where universal measures are very much still the norm.

According to Helakorpi et al. (2018), Norwegian policy documents tend to portray Roma families and parents as deficient. They tend to position Roma culture as in need of protection, while positioning traditions that this culture represent as problematic.

[7] The action plan for improvement of the living conditions of Roma in Oslo (Norwegian Ministry for Work and Inclusion, 2009) was developed following the white paper National minorities in Norway: About state policy on Jews, Kvens, Roma, Travellers and Forest Finns (Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2001). In 2014, the action plan was evaluated and found ineffective (Tyldum & Friberg, 2014). Still, a new operative policy has not been developed (Helakorpi et al., 2018).

[8] In 2018, the measure mainly consists of teachers and is employing only one Romanés-speaking school assistant/mediator. Thus, it can be questioned if the measure bases its work on international research, demonstrating how school mediators with Roma background can increase the level of school participation and educational achievement among Roma pupils (Hagatun, in press).

Challenging the concept of inclusion

One difference between Roma and many other minorities is that they are not willing to procure formal education at the cost of what they experience as assimilation. According to Gressgård (2007), Norwegian policy is characterized by a "friendly eagerness to include" where minorities are regarded as potentially "like ourselves." Norwegian values are perceived as universal and all rational individuals obviously wish to align with these values. Thus, Norwegians see themselves as constituting a nation of equal and autonomous individuals, while "the others" own the impossible differences (Gressgård, 2005, p. 56). From this perspective, the school system is portrayed as universally inclusive, while Roma and others who are not willing to be included on set premises are portrayed as exclusive. The Roma are constructed as a problem; to be included, they must be assimilated and succumb to the system (Westrheim & Hagatun, 2015).

I argue that Roma's educational situation is a litmus test for our educational system. As long as the Roma experience the school system as assimilating, we can argue that inclusion, as understood and practiced within the Norwegian educational system, entails a high degree of assimilation. Roma mothers who actively negotiate the school system, trying to be included without being assimilated, represent a unique possibility to address how to understand inclusion and exclusion as processes of power.

Final Reflections

This article has explored how a group of Roma mothers actively negotiate how to prioritize education and simultaneously prioritize the core values and practices they experience as vital for "being Roma." The findings, describing the different negotiating strategies used by the mothers, challenge the strong metanarrative tending to portray Roma parents in Norway as a homogenous group, both unwilling and unable to procure education for their children. D'Arcy (2014) stresses the need to refute "stock stories" in terms of common assumptions and stereotypes about Roma families, by using counter stories based on Roma's own accounts. Thus, the actively negotiating mothers need to be recognized, both in the schools and in the public debate.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Roma community in Oslo and all the participants who have engaged in my project. She would like to extend her warmest thanks to those who have acted as door openers during field work, especially Nina Mohaugen who also has been invaluable as research assistant. She would also like to thank Prof. Kariane Westrheim and Assoc. Prof. Hanne Riese, University of Bergen, for their valuable input during the writing process. Last but not least, she would wish to thank Prof. Andrea Óhidy for inviting me to contribute to this special issue.

About the Author

KH is a PhD candidate at the Department of Education, University of Bergen, Norway. Her research interest lies at the junction of minority issues, ethnography, critical theory, and educational policy. In 2018, she was invited to present her research at the Christie Conference, one of Norway's most important arenas for collaboration between academia, business, arts, and government. She has also worked as a teacher for 14 years in lower secondary school.

References

Aarset, M. F., & Lidén, H. (2017). Historiens betydning for rom og romanifolkets/tateres situasjon i dag [The importance of history for the current situation of Roma and Romani people]. In N. Brandal, C. A. Døving, & I. Plesner (Eds.), *Nasjonale minoriteter og urfolk. I norsk politikk fra 1900 til 2016* [National minorities and indigenous people. In Norwegian policy from 1900 to 2016] (pp. 201–217). Oslo, Norway: Cappelen Damm Forlag.

Ahearn, L. M. (1999). Agency. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, *9*(1–2), 9–15. doi:10.1525/jlin.1999.9.1-2.12

Ahearn, L. M. (2001). Language and agency. *Annual Review Anthropology*, *30*(1), 109–137. doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.30.1.109

Becker, H. S. (1967). Whose side are we on? *Social Problems*, *14*(3), 239–247. doi:10.2307/799147

Cannella, G. S., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2007). Predatory vs. dialogic ethics. Constructing an illusion or ethical practice as the core of research methods. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *13*(3), 315–335. doi:10.1177/1077800406297648

Chase, S. E. (2008). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 57–94). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Council of Europe. (1992). *European charter for regional or minority languages*. European Treaty Series – No. 148. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe. Retrieved from http://www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages/text-of-the-charter

Council of Europe. (1995). *Treaty 157. (n.d.). Framework convention for the protection of national minorities*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe. Retrieved from http://www.coe.int/en/web/minorities/text-of-the-convention

Council of Europe. (2015). *Report by Nils Muiznieks, commissioner for human rights of the Council of Europe, following his visit to Norway from 19 to 23 January 2015*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe. Retrieved from https://rm.coe.int/16806db889

Culhane, D. (2017). Imagining: An introduction. In D. Elliott & D. Culhane (Eds.), *A different kind of ethnography* (pp. 1–22). Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

D'Arcy, K. (2014). Home education, school, travellers and educational inclusion. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *35*(5), 818–835. doi:10.1080/01425692.2014.919840

Eisenhart, M. (2001). Changing conceptions of culture and ethnographic methodology: Recent thematic shifts and their implications for research on teaching. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed., pp. 209–225). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Engebrigtsen, A. (2015). Educating the Roma: The struggle for cultural autonomy in a seminomadic group in Norway. *Social Inclusion*, *3*(5), 115–125. doi:10.17645/si.v3i5.275

Engebrigtsen, A., & Lidén, H. (2010). Å finne sin plass som minoritet – Rombefolkningen i Norge i dag [Finding their place as a minority – The Roma population in Norway today]. In A. B. Lund & B. B. Moen (Eds.), *Nasjonale minoriteter i det flerkulturelle Norge* [National minorities in multicultural Norway] (pp. 199–214). Trondheim, Norway: Tapir akademiske forlag.

Gressgård, R. (2005). *Fra identitet til forskjell* [From identity to difference]. Oslo, Norway: Scandinavian Academic Press.

Gressgård, R. (2007). "Det beste fra to kulturer": frihet og fellesskap ["The best of two cultures": Freedom and community]. In Ø. Fuglerud & T. Hylland Eriksen (Eds.), *Grenser for kultur?: Perspektiver fra norsk minoritetsforskning* [Borders for culture?: Perspectives from Norwegian minority research]. Oslo, Norway: Pax.

Hagatun, K. (in press). The educational situation for Roma in Norway. A country study. In A. Óhidy & K. Forray (Eds.), *Lifelong learning for Roma in the European Union*. Emerald Publishing: Bingley, UK.

Hagatun, K., & Westrheim, K. (2014). "Vi klarer oss uansett – det har vi gjort i fem hundre år": Perspektiver på utdanningssituasjonen til norske rombarn ["We manage anyway –We have done that for five hundred years": Perspectives on the educational situation of Norwegian Roma children]. In K. Westrheim & A. Tolo (Eds.), *Kompetanse for mangfold. Om skolens rolle og utfordringer i det Flerkulturelle Norge* [Expertise for diversity. About the school's role and challenges in multicultural Norway] (pp. 243–273). Bergen, Norway: Fagbokforlaget.

Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Helakorpi, J., Lappalainen, S., & Mietola, R. (2018). Equality in the making? Roma and traveller minority policies and basic education in three Nordic countries. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*. Advance online publication. 1–18. doi:10.1080/00313831.2018.1485735

Lidén, H. (1990). *Vokse opp som sigøyner i Norge: sosialisering i en etnisk minoritetsgruppe. (Magister-gradsoppgave)* [Grow up as a gypsy in Norway: Socialization in an ethnic minority group] (Master's thesis). University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway.

Lidén, H. (2005). *Barn og unge fra nasjonale minoriteter: en nordisk kunnskapsoversikt* [Children and adolescents from national minorities: A Nordic review]. Oslo, Norway: Institute of Social Research. Retrieved from https://docplayer.me/4106498-Rapport-2005-7-hilde-liden-barn-og-unge-fra-nasjonale-minoriteter-en-nordisk-kunnskapsoversikt.html

Narayan, U. (1997). *Dislocating cultures: Identities, traditions, and third-world feminism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Norwegian Ministry for Work and Inclusion. (2009). *Handlingsplan for å bedre levekårene for rom i Oslo* [Action plan for improvement of the living conditions of Roma in Oslo]. Oslo, Norway: Norwegian Ministry for Work and Inclusion. Retrieved from https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/FAD/Vedlegg/SAMI/Nasjmin/Handlingsplan_rom_EN.pdf

Norwegian Ministry of Government Administration. (2010). *Tredje periodiske rapport om gjennomføringen av europarådets rammekonvensjon om beskyttelse av nasjonale minoriteter* [Third report submitted by Norway pursuant to article 25, paragraph 2 of the framework convention of national minorities]. Oslo, Norway: Norwegian Ministry of Government Administration. Retrieved from http://docplayer.me/1769438-Third-report-submitted-by-norway-pursuant-to-article-25-paragraph-2-of-the-framework-convention-for-the-protection-of-national-minorities.html

Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development. (2001). *Nasjonale minoritetar I Noreg – Om statleg politikk overfor jødar, kvener, rom, romanifolket og skogfinnar* [National minorities in Norway: State policy on Jews, Kvens, Roma, Traveller and Forest Finns]. St.meld.nr. 15 (2000–2001). Oslo, Norway: Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development.

Olgaç, C. R. (2006). *Den romska minoriteten i majoritetssamhällets skola: från hot till möjlighet (PhD-avhandling)* [The Roma minority in the majority school: from threat to possibility] (PhD thesis). Stockholm, Sweden: HLS Publishers. Retrieved from https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:189317/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Ortner, S. B. (2011). Specifying agency. The Comaroffs and their critics. *Interventions*, *3*(1), 76–84. doi:10.1080/13698010020027038

Rosvoll, M., & Bielenberg, N. (2012). *Antisiganisme, stereotyper og diskriminering av rom* [Antiziganism, stereotypes and discrimination of Roma]. HL-senterets temahefte nr.14. Retrieved from http://www.hlsenteret.no/publikasjoner/digitale-hefter/pdf/hl_temahefte_14_digital.pdf

Rosvoll, M., Lien, L., & Brustad, J. A. (2015). *Å bli dem kvit. Utviklingen av en sigøynerpolitikk og utryddelsen av norske rom* [Å bli dem kvit. The development of a gypsy policy and the extermination of Norwegian Roma.] Oslo, Norway. Retrieved from https://www.hlsenteret.no/aktuelt/nyheter/2015/a_bli_dem_kvit_hl_senteretpdf_lavoppl.pdf

Schall, V. (2017). Språk, identitet og minoritetspolitikk [Language, identity and minority policy]. In N. Brandal, C. A. Døving, & I. Thorson Plesner (Eds.), *Nasjonale minoriteter og urfolk i norsk politikk fra 1900 til 2016* [National minorities and indigenous people. In Norwegian policy from 1900 to 2016] (pp. 201–217). Oslo, Norway: Cappelen Damm Akademisk.

Scheper-Hughes, N., & Bourgois, P. (2004). Introduction: Making sence of violence. In N. Scheper-Hughes & P. Bourgois (Eds.), *Violence in war and peace*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Setti, F. (2017). Long-lasting fieldwork, ethnographic restitution and 'Engaged Anthropology' in Romani studies. *The Urban Review*, *49*(3), 372–381. doi:10.1007/s11256-016-0389-2

Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2013). *Annual report 2013. Fundamental rights: Challenges and achievements in 2013. Chapter 7: Roma integration*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe. Retrieved from http://docplayer.me/1769438-Third-report-submitted-by-norway-pursuant-to-article-25-paragraph-2-of-the-framework-convention-for-the-protection-of-national-minorities.html

Tyldum, G., & Friberg, J. H. (2014). Et skritt på veien: Evaluering av handlingsplan for å bedre levekårene blant rom i Oslo [First step: Evaluation of the action plan to improve the living conditions of the Roma in Oslo]. Fafo-rapport, 2014:50. Retrieved from http://www.fafo.no/index.php/zoo-publikasjoner/fafo-rapporter/item/et-skritt-pa-veien

Wekker, G. (2016). *White innocence: Paradoxes of colonialism and race*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Westrheim, K., & Hagatun, K. (2015). Hva betyr kompetanse for mangfold i utdanningssystemet? Et kritisk perspektiv på mangfolddiskursen [What does competence for diversity mean in the education system? A critical perspective on the diversity discourse]. *Norsk Pedagogisk Tidsskrift*, *99*(3–4), 168–180.