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# Social and Economic Vulnerability of Roma People

Key Factors for the Success and  
Continuity of Schooling Levels

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# Chapter 7

## The Multiple Stories in Finnish Roma Schooling



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**Abstract** Regardless of the good reputation of the Finnish basic education system, Finnish Roma children fall behind the overall average in their performance of academic skills: Roma children face more challenges completing basic education and have more repeated school years. Furthermore, compared to the average, Roma youth apply less for upper secondary education and thus their general level of education remains low. However, looking at Roma education solely through problematic representations only provides a partial picture. In this article, based on two separate sets of fieldwork among Finnish Kaale Roma, we examine how teachers, Roma activists and mediators perceive the educational trajectories of Finnish Roma children and youth. The article seeks to scrutinize Finnish Roma schooling within the framework of the Finnish National Policy on Roma (NRIS). The analysis highlights the multiplicity of voices in the field, discusses the possibilities, and thus problematizes the single-aspect discourse on Roma education. Many countries in Central and Eastern Europe struggle with school and residential segregation, but Finnish Roma face different challenges.

**Keywords** Finnish Kaale Roma · Roma agency · Roma policy · Education · Finland

### Introduction

The Finnish education policy has many positive aspects: schooling is universal, free of charge, based on a universal idea of one school for all with no streaming, and has a strong ethos of equality and inclusion in its latest national curriculum (FNAE 2014). Furthermore, Finnish schools have been ranked as among the best in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment<sup>1</sup> (PISA). Research, however,

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>—23.7.2019.

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shows that practices in Finnish schools do not fulfil the ideals of the education policy; the separate sections in the Finnish National Policy on Roma (NRIS) in regards to Roma education indicate that Roma schooling needs more attention. The education system is selective in subtle ways and equality is not achieved in school outcomes, in which different factors such as race/ethnicity, social class, gender and disability play their part (Kosunen 2016; Juva and Holm 2017; Riitaoja et al. 2019). A selective and marginalizing mechanism also pertains to Roma.

According to various surveys, Roma families and children are eager to start school in the first grade (e.g. Rajala et al. 2011; Rajala and Blomerus 2015). But something happens towards the end of elementary school. National surveys indicate that Roma pupils obtain clearly different, negative educational outcomes in comparison to the national average, and Roma pupils study in segregated arrangements such as home schooling or special class units with adjusted curriculums (Rajala et al. 2011). Furthermore, Roma children are more likely to repeat school years and drop out of school than mainstream students. Consequently, after compulsory school, Roma pupils seek further education less often, i.e. upper secondary education. Thus, Roma do not actualize the assumed conduit from education to employment in the labour market.

There is a tendency in policy work, as well as in research, to look for categorical answers to questions concerning Roma and education (Helakorpi et al. 2018; Curcic and Plaut 2013). This can be understood from the standpoint of policymaking and minority rights: in order to devise and advocate policy measures and a categorical, collective definition of the problem, more effective actions and mainstreaming of the solutions must be found (e.g. Kostka 2015; Toivanen 2015). The overall objective of the EU's platform of National Roma Integration Strategies NRIS is to promote the inclusion and equal treatment of Roma in different spheres of life. The policy stands for the protection of the Roma culture and linguistic rights, and to this end, the approach could be defined as strategic essentialism (cf. Spivak 1996).

Helakorpi et al. (2018) have argued that the first national Roma policy (MSAH 2009) had three prevalent representations of problems regarding the basic education of Finnish Roma: (1) the special needs of Roma pupils, (2) Roma families and (3) the national minority culture in schools. Defining these problems in this way validates different measures, such as Roma mediators in schools. Furthermore, in these problem representations, the main focus is on Roma themselves, whereas the role of the school as an institution receives less attention and is problematized. The 'ownership' of problems is thus explained by learning difficulties among Roma pupils and their needs for special support. Furthermore, problems are blamed on Roma families and their inability to support their children in schools. The focus on Roma excludes the elaborations of different ideological premises. Schools formulate neoliberal subjects, preparing them for competition in neoliberal markets, but the Roma social orders are constructed differently (cf. Brown 2017; Convertino et al. 2017; Grönfors 1997). Instead of focusing solely on Roma students and their families as problems, the school authorities should try to find ways to incorporate different ideas of subject formulation.

Various policies (education, minority rights) should ensure that the language and cultural rights of Roma are promoted in schools. The NRIS suggests that Finnish

schools do not have enough knowledge about Roma. However, it remains unclear what type of knowledge is missing, who should generate and provide this knowledge, and how this knowledge should be used to support Roma pupils. Regardless, the third problem representation of Roma schooling still makes Roma, rather than the schools' obligations, the focus of attention (see also Helakorpi 2019). The new Finnish Roma policy came into force in 2018 (MSAH 2018). The education section was not drastically expanded nor were new solutions introduced, and thus the problem definition and representation remains the same.

In this chapter,<sup>2</sup> we seek to problematize the policy narrative on Finnish Roma in schools by combining the research data that we have gathered in different projects. Methodologically, our study includes interviews and participatory observations. Our research participants have many different positions within the field of education: Roma mediators, Roma parents, project workers, and teachers. The data are from multiple localities in Finland and the fieldwork was conducted at a time when the first Finnish Roma policy was in effect. We wish to draw attention to the multiplicity of actors and positions and to problematize the one-sided story of Roma education. These one-sided stories often display Roma as the passive receiving end of policy actions, whereas our data show the heterogeneity of the situations among Roma pupils, Roma parents and Roma activists, and thus shed light on the Finnish school system and its practices from several standpoints.

## **Background: Finnish Kaale Roma, Roma Policies and Education**

Finnish Roma are a national minority in Finland and their rights to culture and language are protected by the CoE Treaty 157 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the CoE ETS No. 148 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which Finland ratified at the turn of the millennium. Until the 1960–1970s<sup>3</sup> Finnish Roma were subjected to exclusion and assimilation efforts by the state. The school institution took part in these efforts (Pulma 2006, 2012). Furthermore, before the 1960s, many Finnish Roma had problems obtaining permanent housing, which made it difficult to take part in schooling (Stenroos 2019; Rajala et al. 2011). Roma children were also forcibly taken into custody and placed in children's homes designed for Roma children (see Ahvenainen 2014). In Roma children's homes the aim was to 'normalize' Roma

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<sup>2</sup>This research was funded by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland's ALL-YOUTH project (Decision No. 312689).

<sup>3</sup>At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, Roma activism led to changes in Roma politics in Finland and consequently the nature of Roma politics started to shift from assimilation towards participation. During this period, governmental bodies started to acknowledge Roma rights (Stenroos 2019).

children and thus eradicate the Roma culture and language (Pulma 2006, pp. 163–165).

Nowadays, Roma pupils are entitled to the same opportunities in schools as everyone else, but as already described, their school outcomes are still dissatisfactory. Roma pupils also report experiences of bullying and racism within schools (Junkala and Tawah 2009; Rajala et al. 2011; Rajala and Blomerus 2015). In Finland, the school starting age is seven and comprehensive school lasts for 9 years. The average drop-out rate in Finland is under 1% (OSF 2018), but national surveys estimate<sup>4</sup> that until now, about 19% of Roma pupils have not completed comprehensive school (Rajala et al. 2011, p. 58). Free pre-school starts at the age of six and has been compulsory since 2015. The latest Roma strategy, however, raises a concern about the irregularity of Roma children's attendance of pre-school classes (MSAH 2018). After comprehensive school, there are two types of upper secondary education: general upper secondary education and vocational education. General upper secondary education is more likely to lead to academic higher education. The percentage of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) in the age group of 15–19 is below the average of the OECD (6.0) in Finland at 4.2 (OECD 2018). Due to the lack of statistical data on this, the exact number of Roma NEET is difficult to show. However, the Roma Wellbeing Study, conducted by the National Institute for Health and Welfare (Weiste-Paakkanen et al. 2018), indicated that in all the age groups, 31% of Roma who participated in the study had received education after comprehensive school. Furthermore, in all the age groups, only 19% had a regular wage and 8% were studying at the time the study was conducted (Weiste-Paakkanen et al. 2018, pp. 31–33).

## Methodologies

The ethnographic material in this article was gathered during the two and half year-long Roma consortium (2016–2018), funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). This consortium was co-ordinated by the Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (DIAK), whose headquarters are located in Helsinki, the capital of Finland. This consortium consisted of two different funding instruments, one of which was the *promotion of education, skills and lifelong learning*, and the other the *prevention of poverty and social exclusion*. This consortium had 16 different co-implementers and 30 different project workers, of which 21 had a Roma background. In the Finnish

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<sup>4</sup>Although the challenges of Roma education have been recognized, the lack of statistical data on Roma hinders development projects and researchers from gaining exact data on Roma education in different European countries (Messing 2014). However, the restrictions of ethnic registers are well justified (Petrova 2004). Due to the lack of exact data, many Roma projects and researchers conduct different kind of surveys in order to gain information about Roma. In Finland, survey studies are conducted by, for example, the Finnish National Agency for Education (Rajala and Blomerus 2015; Rajala et al. 2011) and the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs (MSAH 2009).

context, this was a large-scale project to promote Roma inclusion. However, although one objective during the project was to enhance Roma education, implementing the project plans was challenging. It was difficult to locate the Roma pupils in the different schools in Helsinki<sup>5</sup> and to determine the problems they had, if any, in their studies. The only possible way was to contact the school authorities and ask about their experiences and ideas of Roma pupils. Due to a lack of data, a survey was sent out to 130 schools in Helsinki, to which seventy-two (72) schools responded. This survey was a tool for project purposes and should not be considered as representing formal statistics.

One data set of the chapter consists of ethnographic interviews with Roma mediators in four different localities. This data, independent from the other project, were collected by interviewing Roma mediators and observing their work for 1–4 days in the autumn of 2012.

As ethnographical methodologies suggest, the purpose of this chapter is to expand the focus from the school premises to cover wider social spaces of young Roma, inside and outside of school.

## Numbers in Roma Education: And the Background Stories

In 2015, the National Agency for Education of Finland (Rajala & Blomerus 2015) conducted a study on the educational backgrounds of Roma. The study indicated that two thirds of adult Roma (age 18 to over 65) had completed their basic education. This is a clear improvement, as in the 1950s the respective percentage was only 25%. The study also suggested that only one third of adult Roma had a vocational degree. As it is more common for Roma to educate themselves in vocational institutes, fewer enrol in general upper secondary school (Rajala and Blomerus 2015). In 2018, the FNAE published a guidebook for Roma to promote upper secondary-level studies. General upper secondary education is more likely to lead to tertiary education, especially to research universities, where Roma are still highly underrepresented in Finland.

The FNAE established a unit to promote Roma education in 1994. The first report on the situation of Roma pupils in basic education concerned the school year of 2000–2001 (FNAE 2004). The problems that the Roma pupils faced in the schools were alarming: as Roma children did not formerly participate in pre-primary education, this caused a need to repeat the first or second grade. The development work that started in 2008 for the basic education of Roma pupils,<sup>6</sup> allocated more funds to

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<sup>5</sup>Due to personal data restrictions.

<sup>6</sup>The national development work of the basic education of Roma pupils began in Finland in 2008, as part of the development of the quality of basic education. For the first time, municipal authorities were able to apply to the Finnish National Board of Education for government aid to support the basic education of Roma pupils.

the municipality level to tackle Roma schooling challenges. These investments have gradually paid off and improved the situation, especially in regard to attendance of pre-primary education. According to follow-ups, the situation has improved considerably since the beginning of the 1990s and families have been willing to take their children to pre-school, which means that repeated school years in the first grade have decreased (Rajala et al. 2011).

The most recent reports (school year 2010–2011) indicate that the performance of about 30% of Roma children in basic education is weak. This, however, is an improvement from the first report (school year 2001–2002), which estimated that approximately 10% of Roma pupils were doing well in theoretical subjects (Rajala et al. 2011). Nevertheless, despite the gradual improvement in Roma education, Roma still lag behind the average in academic performance. The level of education among Roma is not adequate for today's labour markets.

The other set of survey data used in this chapter, gathered by the Roma project in 2016–2018, are separate from the studies of the Finnish National Agency for Education. This survey only covered schools in Helsinki. It is difficult to estimate whether it allows for differences in responses, as the authors of the survey were project workers rather than education authorities. The information attained through the survey was even more alarming than the surveys by FNAE. Most of the respondent schools were located in the eastern part of Helsinki, where also relatively more Roma families live. There were regional differences in the survey responses, probably due to smaller numbers of Roma pupils in particular school districts. The Finnish capital metropolitan area is covered by three closely located cities: Helsinki, Vantaa and Espoo. Many Roma live in Vantaa and some in Espoo, but this survey was restricted to the schools under the Helsinki city administration. Either a curator, teacher, student counsellor, or school rector responded to the survey. There were altogether 59 Roma students in both lower elementary school and upper elementary school in 36 different schools. The survey revealed two issues; the number of Roma pupils in Helsinki elementary schools is relatively small and Roma pupils are scattered around the city in such a way that one school might have one or two Roma pupils but seldom more than five. The setting is very different to that in Eastern and Central Europe, where the challenge has been school segregation.

The results indicate that only 25% of the Roma students' school grades were average or above, the rest had some difficulties with their studies. The biggest problem with some Roma pupils seemed to be absenteeism. The school attendance statistics indicated that 1/3 attended classes regularly, 1/3 had some absences, and that for 1/3 these absences were considerable. Twenty per cent of the Roma students in Helsinki studied in separate arrangements, smaller classes or similar settings. Half of the students had an intensified or special support system to foster their education. The estimation of Roma pupils in the Helsinki elementary schools depicted a harsher and more negative picture than the survey conducted by the National Agency for Education. According to their survey, school principals estimated that 70% of Roma students were doing well at school (Rajala et al. 2011, p. 92). A co-ordinator for the



government aid support<sup>7</sup> of the basic education of Roma pupils in the Finnish National Board of Education confirmed<sup>8</sup> that the problems of Roma pupils were accumulated and more severe in the capital region than elsewhere in Finland.

Comparing these surveys is challenging, as one is nationwide and the other focuses on one city. As the results depended on the willingness of the schools in Helsinki to respond, the survey can only be considered indicative. However, even though there has been a gradual improvement in the long term (more Roma complete their basic education), repeating a school year, absenteeism and not seeking further education immediately after elementary school continues to be a problem.

## Stories About Roma Education

The numerical data on Roma education represents only one dimension. In the field of Roma policy implementation, and particularly in projects aiming to enhance Roma education, it is common and in a sense logical that only those Roma who are in need of special support systems are the recipients of empowering and supportive actions. Consequently, the data cover only a fraction of Roma students. The research conducted in Roma inclusion projects is subsequently in danger of revealing only one single story about Roma education, which again fosters the idea of Roma self-segregating themselves, devaluing education and considering schools ‘alien institutions’, and this in turn strengthens the perceptions of the Roma culture as opposing mainstream culture (Brüggemann 2014; Curcic and Plaut 2013; Lee and Warren 1991). In order to avoid portraying Roma as passive bystanders of empowering actions, we wish to highlight their role in the processes of improving Roma education.

In Roma (education) policies, Roma have often been positioned as people (s) instead of individual subjects (Curcic and Plaut 2013, p. 71), in other words, Roma are understood as a coherent, homogenous ethnic group and no attention is paid to social and economic variations among the group’s members. This collective, coherent group identity is justified in the processes of advocating collective Roma rights, as experiences of discrimination and stigmatization are commonly shared. At the same time, the collective group identity plays a role in creating the danger of a single story. In both assimilation practices and integration policies, Roma are categorized and labelled as a homogenous group, and thus through categorization integration and assimilation practices, they are two sides of the same coin (Clavé-Mercier and Olivera 2018).

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<sup>7</sup>The national development work of the basic education of Roma pupils began in Finland in 2008 as part of the development of the quality of basic education. For the first time, municipal authorities were able to apply to the Finnish National Board of Education for government aid to support the basic education of Roma pupils. Based on the aid directed to the capital region, the situation in the metropolitan area is worse than in other parts of the country.

<sup>8</sup>Information received by email June 20, 2018.



A Finnish Roma woman who had worked for several years in Roma education remarked that: ‘We have 500 years of discrimination on our shoulders. It cannot be denied that it shows’. Balancing between the stories of discrimination on the one hand and the ‘success stories’ on the other is a tricky task. Barriers exist for Roma education, despite individual strategies to tackle them (Brüggemann 2014). However, the tendency is that these stories of challenges, barriers and struggles overshadow the ‘just-like-everyone-else’ stories. Roma in education constitute a sociocultural category which is not like ‘everyone else’. Public schools are cultural institutes and Roma children are in the juncture and the space of different demands addressed by mainstream society and by their own community group (cf. Ogbu 2008). This is also the point at which researchers walk on eggshells, carefully avoiding the essential approach yet not downplaying the efforts of Roma policies and the paradigms on which they lean. Tremlett (2014) offers the concept of ‘super-diversity’ to navigate in the Romani studies of ethnic grouping versus individual stories within the realm of ethnicity and multiculturalism. She argues that de-essentialisation is necessary, but that we must not lose sight of ethnicity, and here the concept of ‘super-diversity’ is useful (Tremlett 2014). Tremlett thus tackles the same problem as Spivak (1996): the need to accept a certain amount and type of essentialism. As we introduce the practices of Roma mediators in schools, we also approach the question from the perspective of super-diversity and intersectionality.

### *Mediators Outside and Inside Schools*

The Roma project’s co-implementers were located in multiple cities in Finland. Within the project, Roma as a categorical concept was not useful in practice; the diversity among Finnish Kaale Roma had to be considered in order to design the best possible practices for each ‘Roma clientele group’. Some of the co-implementers worked in elementary schools, some only with adults in education institutes, and others worked with both adults and young people. Some project workers worked with inmates in prisons to guide them onto the path of education after being released. There was also a group of people working to support Roma in higher academic education. To this end, the people with whom the project workers worked had multiple individual stories (see also Mäenpää et al. 2018). As a target group, the Roma were diverse: children, adults, prisoners, boys, and girls. Furthermore, they were from different social and economic backgrounds and from different regions in Finland.

As the figures from the surveys indicate, challenges in education persist despite the positive factors from both the aspect of Roma communities and the school system. The project’s steering group made the same comments in regard to the Helsinki district: the amount of school dropouts and studying in separate settings were large in proportion. The challenge of low education level also materialized in the recruitment of Roma to the project. Although, in total there were many Roma workers, the project report reveals that in the beginning it was difficult to recruit

Roma due to their low level of professional skills. This reflects the low pace of improvement in Roma education, although the number of Roma completing basic education has increased decade by decade, especially since the 1970s (Rajala and Blomerus 2015; Rajala et al. 2011), the level of education still does not match the skills required in professional life. One of the supporting measures for Roma schooling has been the process of introducing school mediators with a Roma background to schools.

The term ‘mediator’ simplifies the duties the Roma mediators perform in their work. A mediator in Helsinki explained how according to her work contract her title was assistant, but that the work she did in the classroom was much more than that of an assistant. Schools devalue the work mediators do as they often work with Roma and non-Roma children with learning difficulties and/or behavioural disorders. The mediators’ working conditions are challenging, as they do not normally work full time, but approximately 26 hours a week, their salary is small, and all school holidays are unpaid. Despite the working conditions, according to one mediator, Roma mediators do good work with children and their families. She also emphasized the importance of the visibility of Roma workers in schools, so that teachers can see Roma in their work environments. It is also important that the parents of non-Roma children can meet Roma at work. She further elaborated that the first time she went to the teachers’ room, surprise appeared on the teachers’ faces. She interpreted the surprise as being because she was Roma. The same sort of surprise occurred when she spoke English to an immigrant child who had just recently moved to Finland. The mediator thought this was genuine surprise at the fact that a Roma spoke English: ‘Oh you can speak English, OK’. Overall, she said she was well received in the schools, and had no problems with the teachers, parents or children.

In Tampere, located approximately 200 km from Helsinki, according to project reports, having a Roma person working for the municipality has attained significant results (Mäenpää et al. 2018). With a carefully planned support model and the right person; one who enjoys the trust of the local Roma, it was possible to help Roma children complete their basic education and reach secondary-level education. All the Roma children who participated in the project in Tampere were able to attain their primary school certificate (Perho 2018, p. 61). The role of the mediator is greater than that of the assistants at the school and the work cannot be done on the basis of a regular nine-to-five job. It is also important that the Roma mediator is somebody the local community trusts. One mediator reported that not all Roma families want support from the mediator and therefore it is important to start the process of supporting a Roma child with the parents, to include them in it. Building trust between a young Roma and a mediator takes time, and different professionals are involved in the support system. In the Tampere case, it starts with the Roma mediator visiting different schools in the region to survey the Roma children and their situations. After this, the school staff, the Roma family and the mediator create a more specific support plan for the pupil. The plan is clarified through co-operation between the Roma pupil, the Roma family and the school personnel. The mediators emphasized knowing the children and the families and working closely together with

them. Similar importance is placed on the permanence of the support model in the municipal structures (Mäenpää et al. 2018, p. 243).

In the other fieldwork conducted in four other municipalities in different parts of Finland, the researcher interviewed and observed the work of five mediators for 1–4 days, and interviewed two mediators without observing their work. The findings resemble the observations in Helsinki and Tampere. The work of the mediators was highly effective. Many of the interviewees emphasized the importance of developing these practices locally. Thus, the interviewees found it essential that the work of the mediators was not dictated from the outside but that the mediators and the related workers were able to evaluate and try out what was needed locally. This also indicates the diversity of the education situations of Finnish Roma and how locality is entangled in this. For instance, different municipalities have diverse local histories and different kinds of dynamics,<sup>9</sup> which play a part in the educational situation. Thus, no single narrative can provide a picture of the multitude of these situations, but the interviewed mediators reported good results regarding their support of individual pupils. Their encounters with schools and families also shed light on the ongoing discrimination against Finnish Roma. The mediators reported that one part of their work was dispelling prejudices against Finnish Roma in the schools (see also Helakorpi et al. 2019). As in the cases in Tampere and Helsinki, the work of the interviewees did not follow office hours; the interviewees organized camps, clubs and other events for Roma youth after school days. Furthermore, most of the interviewees were responsible for teaching the Roma mother tongue in their municipality.

To respond to the educational challenges, having Roma mediators at and outside schools appears to be an effective way of supporting Roma children. The mediators worked with families, children and school authorities. They had a holistic approach to their work which involved supporting the schooling, planning future perspectives and landscapes with the young person, intensively working with other professionals, supporting young people outside school, and supporting the whole family in the process. A mediator in Helsinki told us in the interview that sometimes the reasons why certain practices happen in the school environment need to be explained to Roma families, i.e. different standpoints of a bureaucratic practice may need explaining. A Roma mediator is one who strengthens the cultural and ethnic identity of a young person in a space that might challenge the sense of belonging of a young Roma.

The remedies to set the standards of Roma education at a higher level also encompass the actions for transitioning from basic education to vocational and higher education. The Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (DIAK) administrated the Roma project. They indicated two objectives for the project. The first objective was, through education, to lower the barriers to employment, to promote the equality of Roma in Finnish society, and to improve overall inclusion and wellbeing. The second objective was to increase the knowledge of the authorities,

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<sup>9</sup>For different dynamics, see Stenroos (2018).

decision-makers and teachers in regards to Roma culture and education (Perho 2018, p. 56). Within these objectives was preparation training for Roma to enroll at polytechnics and universities of applied sciences.

DIAK carried out the training and workshops in collaboration with Roma NGOs and Roma activists. The role of the NGOs was mainly to reach potentially interested people. Altogether eight people participated in the workshops, although not regularly. There were some challenges because the commitments and needs for the workshops varied. The workshops were held in Helsinki and this might have limited the number of participants. Most of the participants were adult women with families and children (Mäenpää et al. 2018, p. 142). This similar tendency among Roma to seek education in older age, has been observed in a study by the National Agency for Education (Rajala and Blomerus 2015). Another tendency is for Roma women to be more eager to seek higher education.

However, a few students started their studies in DIAK after the workshops ended. Although not many Roma currently have an educational background that is adequate for applying for a place in higher education, the attitudes and mentalities towards academic education have taken a more positive direction. One participant in this training believed that before, Roma mostly wanted quick access to work, which meant a short education, whereas today many Roma realize the importance of higher education.

Two issues can be noted in these stories. First, Roma tend to have a 'pause' in education to establish families at a relatively early age and secondly, there seems to be more interest in higher education among Roma women than men. The latter issue is not a Roma-specific issue and follows the tendency in Finnish society in general. If the common trajectory of the educational path among Roma does not follow the institutionalized trajectory, how can these two trajectories be merged for the best outcome?

### *The Different Life Courses of Finnish Roma Students*

Two teachers, one Roma and the other non-Roma, elucidated the different life courses of Roma in Finnish society. By describing an imaginary Finnish Roma girl and an ethnic Finnish girl they illustrated the challenges they encountered in their work. These two teachers had several years of experience training young Roma people and adults in courses aiming to educate Roma to become mediators in municipal and governmental institutions, i.e. in health care services and schools. Their story of the life courses of two imaginary girls is educative, as it paints viewpoints that are seldom considered when examining the educational challenges of Roma children in the Finnish basic education system. First, they pointed out the agency of the young Roma person in the context of establishing one's position in the Roma community. Secondly, they also pointed out that although it a young person establishing their position in their cultural terrain is a normal process, in the case of Roma this process is often considered by mainstream society as one of

marginalization. Thirdly, their story emphasizes the differences in the life courses, as Roma tend to start families at a relatively early point in life.

For a young Roma person, establishing a position in the Roma community is not an automatic process. It actually requires them to acknowledge the cultural norms and expectations of the Roma community. Entering into adulthood carries the duty to follow the behavioural norms of adults and this can sometimes be stressful for the young person. One young Roma said that sometimes he avoided situations with older Roma as he felt he did not know the rules well enough. In front of older Roma people one cannot express issues related to the body, sexuality or romantic relations: these issues are taboo. Roma taboos often stem from purity norms; a young Roma girl wanting to date a young man needs to 'elope' from the sights of older Roma, and this gesture is considered respect for the elderly, and shames dating practices (Markkanen 2003, p. 124). In Finnish culture it is typical for a girl to bring her boyfriend to hang out at home after school days. This is not the same case for a Roma girl.

A young Roma girl starts to make her path to Roma adulthood during puberty. They start to follow the norms, speak and dress accordingly and seek the company of other young Roma. They want to establish their position among the Roma and in practice this means spending time with other Roma. The number of young Roma in one school can be very few, typically in Helsinki one to five Roma in one school. Establishing one's position in the community cannot happen at school, as young Roma are scattered around the cities. This process becomes a meaningful priority and school becomes secondary. A young Roma works on becoming an adult member of the community to avoid inner group exclusion. Meanwhile this process, from the perspective of Finnish society and the school, looks as if the young Roma is being marginalized from Finnish society. Teachers lack cultural knowledge of this socialization. (Ethnographic interview August 2018).

The experiences of the two teachers reveal a deviation in the life courses of an ethnic Finn and Roma adolescents. Roma young people do not find peers in the school environment as the total number of Roma in Finland is estimated to be 10,000–12,000, of which a few thousands are probably teenagers. It is understandable that young Roma try to redeem their place in the community by seeking the company of other young Roma and start following their cultural norms as a manifestation of belonging. For the children and young people of the mainstream population, school is also a place to socialize, meet friends and possibly find someone to bond with romantically. Thus, Roma children and young people sometimes face loneliness and bullying in schools. Young Roma may experience a feeling of otherness in their lives, and it follows that the school does not become as meaningful a social environment for them.

This teachers' interview underlines the viewpoint of a young Roma. There is a tendency to forget the agency of young Roma in regard to Roma education, and furthermore to disregard how Roma establish their position in their own community. Researchers often look for explanations in parents' ability to support their children's education, in the opposing cultures, or focus on the schools as alienating institutions (Brüggemann 2014). However, the challenges and barriers in Roma education are

complex, multifaceted and should be examined as sociohistorical interplay between different actors, each one having an impact on other.

These reflections are similar to those noted by the Finnish National Agency for Education's Roma education unit in their studies (Rajala et al. 2011, p. 95). They observed that in the completion of basic education and in seeking further education, too many Roma still fail to gain their basic education certificate or do not seek further education. They suggest that the reason is the early assumption of adult status and starting a family early. In many cases, absences from school are the reason why elementary school is not completed. The critical deviation that impacts on Roma children is considered to take place around the age of ten (10), approximately during the fifth and sixth grades. This aligns with the two teachers' reports: 'when you first start family life, have some children and when you attain your place in the community, then the interest and commitment for education is higher'.

The narrative of the Roma girl and Finnish girl is essentialist but serves as an example narration of how these two teachers in the adult education institute make sense of their challenges at work. In their narration, they seek understanding of the social and cultural issues behind the stories. The education personnel in the municipal schools elaborate on the Finnish educational institute premises and neglect different premises.

### ***Teachers' Viewpoints on Roma Pupils***

The teachers and study counsellors noticed that in addition to systematic absences from school, communication with the family was almost non-existent, and consequently, providing support and guidance for both the pupils and their parents was challenging and irregular. One of the comments was that no single Roma pupil in their school had completed basic education and/or sought further education after elementary school. It was not clear how many Roma pupils they had had over the years, but as a statement coming from a school professional, it sounds alarming that no Roma students had succeeded in their schooling. It was also considered problematic that Roma parents do not seek support or guidance. Furthermore, absences due to different family-related events also occurred more often than with other students. Absences for family events were considered one reason why Roma students could not keep up with others.

One of the respondents wondered why 'culture' is given as an explanation for these challenges: 'How can culture be enough of an explanation for not needing education or for less education? What if educating oneself requires you to abandon some cultural traditions or you need to find new ways to perform and express your traditions?' A teacher stated that Roma pupils have prejudices towards majority Finns and towards how mainstream Finns live and think. Roma students have prejudices toward education *per se*. The same teacher continued to describe the situation: attitudes and ways of living are passed from generation to generation, and the old attitudes still show in the attitudes of Roma pupils.

By analysing the above statement through the positions of the people involved (agency), through structures (school as a cultural institute) and through discourse, we come across what Lauritzen describes as anti-gypsyist discourse, stemming from the essentialist idea of nomadism (Lauritzen 2019). She studied 55 research papers on Roma education and concluded that anti-gypsyist discourse is mainly based on the idea of nomadism and that this is 'ground for understanding Roma disadvantage in education based on apparent nomadism, thus making Roma too different for the regular education system' (ibid. 68). According to her, fictional characteristics are projected onto Roma. In the citation from the teacher in our material, the first sentence speculated on how a culture can be an explanation, but then the teacher goes on to say that one should abandon some cultural traditions or find new ways to express them. There are no indications of how schools as institutions could adjust to the different cultural backgrounds of students, or what a teacher could do to improve the situation.

The idea of abandoning some cultural tradition was only one viewpoint. Some of the teachers were flexible in finding solutions for challenging situations, and different arrangements, such as studying 2 days a week in a youth centre and the rest of the week at school, were allowed by the school. One of the rectors, whom the project workers contacted to ask whether there were Roma students in his school and whether they needed support in their studies, responded: 'We have one family here. They do not need your help, the parents work and are active in school activities and the children are doing fine with their studies. Not only that, the children have clear goals in mind.' Another project worker told us that the children attending Roma language courses did not need any extra support. One of them, for example, had top grades and was planning to become a doctor. This is not to say that the challenges of Roma education do not exist, only that the situation is not the same for each Roma child.

Although historical oppression and discrimination as explanations for the disadvantages of Roma students has been strongly criticized by some Roma activists in Finland, 'how long can we explain the situation using history?', some activists emphasize that history still appears in the interactions between the majority Finns and Roma. Consequently, it is necessary to examine Roma education in a larger societal context, as an interplay between the different actors involved. The involvement of Roma activists, Romani elite and NGOs in promoting education indicate that Roma recognize the importance of mainstream education as a social capital for involvement and inclusion (Trubeta 2013, pp. 22–24). There is still a great deal of work to be done with Roma education in Finland, but at the same time, there are people doing this work and examining the alternatives to enable the required adjustments.

Nigerian storyteller Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (TedGlobal 2009) warned us about the danger of a single story: 'Our lives, our cultures, are composed of many overlapping stories. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story'. This is the same with the Roma education situation. If we only hear the numbers of dropouts or uncompleted basic education,



then it is easy to say Roma parents do not have the skills to support their children, and that Roma do not value the education system, that Roma self-segregate. Instead, when examining (through ethnographic methods) who does what, why they do it and where they do it, the elaboration of Roma education is in a complex, societal context. Roma schooling is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon and as such, there is no single, simple, effective solution to solve the challenge of a low education level. What we suggest here is reconsidering the interplay between societal and community forces in schools or concerning the learning challenges of Roma children, instead of limiting study to a single topic, such as anti-gypsyism.

## **Concluding Remarks and Discussions**

In this article, we have represented stories about Roma education and schooling through the eyes of Roma mediators, teachers and Roma project workers. By doing so, we have aimed to expand the focus from schools as the sole unit responsible for education to cover other social aspects of young Roma students. The wider focus provides the possibility to avoid a single story of Roma education: the same single story that the Roma policies also recreate and maintain.

Finland as a country in which education is free of charge, universal, and has a national curriculum that supports diversity in schools, and yet where Roma students lag behind the mainstream students, provides a setting that calls for a wider focus. Having Roma mediators in schools is part of this wider focus. Their work does not only cover the children in the schools but also families, entire Roma communities, and school personnel. Through the work of mediators, the definition of challenges becomes wider – their work calls for examining both societal and community forces.

The multiple actors and multiple stories about Roma education further force us to look beyond the period of elementary school. There is a need to think about what motivates Roma to attend school, as it is not a straight conduit from education to work. We also need to look at the socialization processes of young Roma, as the interview of the two teachers revealed, to acknowledge that this socialization process does not necessarily happen in the school environment.

Our elaborations in this article indicate that there is no single, overarching solution to enhance Roma education. Regional differences further indicate that the challenge is structural; what has worked in Tampere has not worked in Helsinki. But at the same time, regional differences indicate that Roma communities are organized in different ways in smaller cities than in the capital area. To conclude, as nationwide policies support equality in schooling, the attention should be on regional implementation. With a wide focus.

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