



## The Educational Situation for Roma Children in Norway: Silenced Narratives on Schooling and Future

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Peer-reviewed article; received 31 October 2019; accepted 04 June 2020

### Abstract

This article explores how Roma pupils in Norway experience school. Using portraiture methodology, I narrate the experiences of Leah, Hannah and Maria, focusing on their situation before and after the transition from elementary to lower secondary school. The article demonstrates how children negotiate and are negotiated by, intersecting racializing and gendering structures, using decolonial perspectives. One key finding is the complexity in how the schools' knowledge discourses, and subsequent practices and attitudes, play out in the girls' agency. I emphasize the need to produce counter-narratives by identifying agency, rather than depicting Roma in positions as either exotic or marginalized. Overall, the article addresses how coloniality still produces and upholds structures of inequality that render groups like Roma as non-existent in education. Turning the lens towards the inadequacy of an educational system that struggles to recognize the need for radical structural change, the article challenges a strong metanarrative within research and public debate that depicts "the different Roma culture" as the main explanation to low educational attainment among Roma pupils. I argue that the agency of Roma in Norway, who historically have resisted formal education experienced as forced assimilation, represents a unique opportunity to critically examine and rethink how inclusion is understood and operationalized in schools. Thus, knowledge about how school is experienced by Roma pupils today constitutes a vital contribution to the needed effort to decolonialize the educational system.

**Keywords:** Roma pupils; formal education; portraiture; intersectionality; decolonial perspectives

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## Introduction

The article aims to explore how life at school is experienced by Roma<sup>2</sup> children in Norway, adopting an ethnographic approach with interviews and observant participation as main methods. The article presents the stories about Leah, Hannah and Maria, whom I got to know in their last year of elementary school, and whom I met again after they transitioned to lower secondary school. These girls' stories are interesting because many Roma children, especially girls, are found to drop out of school during this transition at a disproportionate rate (Hagatun, 2019a). Moreover, the portraits illuminate common structural issues salient in the overall empirical material, that needs to be addressed by the educational system.

By adopting an intersectional awareness to the concepts of gender and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989), the article demonstrates how pupils negotiate and are negotiated by, intersecting racializing and gendering structures. The findings reveal how colonial knowledge discourses which Roma girls encounter in school play out in their agency. Thus, I see agency as negotiated and practiced from desires that emerge from complex constraining and/or enabling social structures both within schools, in the Roma community, and society as such (Ortner, 2011).

The educational situation for Roma in Norway is found to be consistently poor (Hagatun, 2019a). There is a strong metanarrative within educational research and public debate in which “the Roma culture” is portrayed as the main explanation to low educational attainment among Roma pupils (Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018). Applying decolonial perspectives (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Quijano, 2000), I focus on the inadequacy of the educational system which struggles to recognize the need for radical structural change to address inequality. Turning to portraiture as methodology, I emphasize the need to produce counter-narratives that identify agency (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), rather than rendering Roma in positions as exotic or marginal. Counter-narratives serve both to foreground the experiences of those who are silenced, and as “a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power, whose story is an ordinary part of the dominant discourse—the majoritarian story” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32).

The discussion addresses how coloniality still produces and upholds structures of inequality that render groups like Roma as non-existent in education. I argue that the agency of Roma, who historically have resisted education experienced as forced assimilation, inspires to critically examine and rethink dominant oppressing structures in the educational system. Drawing on theory of resistance (Lugones, 2010), the article aims to illustrate how Roma agency can point towards some decolonial options in education.

The research questions explored are: (1) How are Roma girls negotiating and being negotiated by colonial knowledge discourses, gendered and racialized practices in

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<sup>2</sup> Norway recognizes *Rom* and *Romani people* as two separate national minorities. I choose to apply the internationally used term *Roma* when referring to the group called Rom. The term *Romani* will be applied when referring to *Romani studies*.

school? (2) How can the girls' agency forefront counter-narratives which challenge racialized, gendered and stereotyped meta-narratives upheld in the educational system? (3) How can Roma agency point towards decolonial options in education?

## Background

### Educational situation

The Norwegian school system consists of elementary school (ages 6-13), lower secondary school (ages 13-16), and upper secondary school (ages 16-19). Every child has both a right and an obligation to complete lower secondary school.<sup>3</sup> Because of limited research focusing on the educational situation, and laws that prohibit registration of students' ethnicity, there is a lack of knowledge about the formal educational attainment of Roma in Norway (Hagatun, 2019a). Existing literature indicates severe lacks in the children's schooling, with high dropout rates and consistent low school attendance (Engebriksen & Lidén, 2010; Hagatun, 2019a). In recent years, more parents are found to send their children to school regularly (Hagatun, 2019b). The socio-economic situation in the community, consisting of some 700 individuals mainly living in Oslo municipality, is characterized by persistent problems with housing, economic issues, health problems, illiteracy and discrimination (Engebriksen & Lidén, 2010).

Both in research and the national public debate, Roma's strong wish to keep their traditions has been pointed out as the main obstacle to improve their formal educational attainment (Hagatun, 2019a), whereas some studies emphasize lacks in the educational system as a main explanation (e.g., Hagatun, 2019b). Common cultural explanations are e.g. that (1) girls quit school when they reach puberty because parents are afraid they might lose their purity and consequently their future as valuable wives and mothers, (2) that boys quit school because they will learn their trade through informal learning in the community, and (3) that Roma parents do not send their children to school because they will become "too Norwegian" (Hagatun, 2019b).

The emphasis on cultural over structural perspectives in educational research on Roma is problematized in a review by Lauritzen and Nodeland (2018). They argue that the focus on cultural differences might reinforce stereotypes essentializing Romani way of life as incompatible with formal education. By drawing on decolonial perspectives and turning the lens towards the inadequacy of the educational system, this article aims to contribute to knowledge about structural issues in this field.

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<sup>3</sup> In the following, "lower secondary school" will be shortened to "secondary school".

### Education policy

Roma were recognized as a national minority in 1999, and Romanes as a national minority language, when Norway ratified the international conventions *Framework convention for the protection of National minorities* (Council of Europe, 1995) and *European charter for regional or minority languages* (Council of Europe, 1992). Historically, the group has been considered difficult to integrate, and Roma families were forced to leave Norway in the 1920s and 1930s due to exclusion policies (Brustad et al., 2017). The history of 68 individuals who were stripped of their Norwegian citizenship when trying to return in 1934, and families that were extinguished in the Nazi concentration camps during World War II, has created a trauma that still marks the relationship between the community and the Norwegian authorities (Rosvoll et al., 2015). In 2015, the Roma community group finally received a public apology for their sufferings, and in 2018 they used the economic compensation to found a culture- and resource center, *Romano Kher* (Hagatun, 2019a).

By granting Roma national minority status, the Norwegian state took on international commitments to protect and develop Roma culture and language (Council of Europe, 1992, 1995). However, these commitments have not been implemented in national law, and are also lacking in school regulations (Helakorpi et al., 2018; Schall, 2017). For decades, the educational policy measures targeted Roma adults, based on the assumption that children would follow if Roma parents received formal education. The measures had limited success, and the policy was repeatedly criticized for lacking children's perspective (The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2013; Tyldum & Friberg, 2014). To compensate, a governmental special measure targeting children's education was founded in 2011. The *Roma Mediator Service*<sup>4</sup> currently employs Romanes speaking school assistants from the Roma community, as well as Norwegian-speaking teachers<sup>5</sup>, who mediate between pupils, their parents, and schools. The measure has been positively received in the Roma community but lacks the resources to accommodate all schools and families in need of their support (The equality and anti-discrimination ombudsman [LDO], 2018). As the analysis below demonstrates, the mediator service is a crucial broker for Roma children in schools.

## Theoretical approaches

### Decolonial perspectives

In recent years, there has been a rise in efforts to decolonize higher education by attempting to decenter knowledge and knowledge production, to devalue traditional hierarchies, and to diversify curriculums. The goal is to address, and ultimately end, the ways power

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<sup>4</sup> My translation of "Skolelostjenesten", earlier named "Romlostjenesten".

<sup>5</sup> To separate from ordinary assistants and teachers, I apply the terms *school assistant mediators* and *teacher mediators* in the following.

relations and epistemologies produced through colonialism continually shape present-day society (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). By focusing on elementary and secondary school, the article aims to address how coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), works in lower parts of the educational system.

Decolonial perspectives entail an acknowledgement of the lived experience of colonization, what Maldonado-Torres (2007) refers to as *coloniality of being*. The concept describes life at the dark side of the modern/colonial project, where colonized people are targeted by the institutions of power that protect populations on the light side of the divide. The coloniality of being describes how coloniality produces risk and poverty in marginalized people's lives, and render liminal subjects invisible and silenced (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

Both in policy documents and Romani studies, the history of Roma is often portrayed as “mysterious”. The focus has been on nomadic attributes, thus silencing four hundred years of enslavement in the Balkan states and the way Roma were exploited as unpaid labor in India, Africa and America during the Atlantic slave trade (Hancock, 1987). Today, Roma are subjected to extensive discrimination and Romaphobia throughout Europe (Fekete, 2014; van Baar, 2011) and in Norway (Rosvoll & Bielenberg, 2012). To recognize Roma as people whose humanity has been negated in the wake of colonization, surpasses Global North/South and indigenous/settler discourses which tend to dominate decolonial thought (e.g., Tuck & Yang, 2012). As argued by Tom, Suárez-Krabbe, and Caballero Castro (2017, p. 122) such binary approaches “subalternize and invisibilize populations such as the Roma”.

Connell (2014) argues that the colonial academic power divide, valuing the Global South as a source for empirical material while the western part as the source of theory production, is also present within regions. In Norway, Roma are rendered into a position as “uneducated”, thus not able contributors to knowledge production. Within the educational system, minorities like Roma are expected to consume existing knowledge (Westrheim & Hagatun, 2015).

### **Intersectional awareness**

Intersectionality makes it possible to address how socially constructed categories like gender and race must be seen in relation to other axes of difference, like class, sexuality and (dis)ability (Crenshaw, 1991). Within a decolonial framework, social locations and their intersections must be viewed as politicized and constituted by historically constructed power relations. Roma are most often described, and describe themselves, as an “ethnic group”. In Norway, the concept of race has long been a taboo in the public debate and most academic discourses (see e.g., Gullestad, 2002; Svendsen, 2013). Instead, the concept of ethnicity is often used, portrayed as a more “neutral” and “softer” term linked to the cultural rather than the biological domain. Wekker (2016, p. 22) claims that “in the move to ethnicity and subsequently to culture and culturalization (...) the work that race

used to do, ordering reality on the basis of supposed biological difference (...) is still being accomplished”. Thus, ethnicity represents a racialized grammar of difference, where the difference between people is defined by appearance, origin, history, language, culture and religion. Although Roma is a politically defined and cultural concept rather than a biological marker, the fact that the concept is linked to ethnicity suggests that it should be understood as part of a racialized grammar.

In educational research, gender is often applied as an empirical category, understood as a biological marker. Situated in a tradition originated from the Global South, Lugones (2008) coined the concept *coloniality of gender*, addressing how gender needs to be understood in light of coloniality, and that heterosexuality and masculinity permeates global euro-centered capitalism. Studies of the place of gender during imperialism demonstrate how “the white colonizer constructed a powerful inside force as colonized men were co-opted into patriarchal roles” (Lugones, 2008, p. 10). The coloniality of gender opens up for understanding “the extent and importance of the gender system in disintegrating communal relations, egalitarian relations, ritual thinking, collective decision making, collective authority, and economies” (Lugones, 2008, p. 12). Arguing for decolonial feminism, Lugones (2010) attempts to decenter and decolonize the way one thinks about gender as a concept, seeking to understand people’s lived experiences of gender in cross-class and cross-ethnoracial contexts. Here, this means that I adopt a critical awareness towards how Eurocentric white middle class (feminist) traditions shape understandings of gender within the educational system, as well as an awareness that colonial structures of gender work within the Roma community.

### **Agency**

As well as emphasizing how colonial social structures constrain agency for marginalized groups, decolonial perspectives accentuate the need and capacity for challenging and changing such social structures. Historically, the Roma community in Norway has resisted attempts at forced assimilation and one strategy has been to avoid the educational system (Engebriksen & Lidén, 2010). This can be understood in light of *theory of resistance* which “shows the power of communities of the oppressed in constituting resistant meaning and each other against the constitution of meaning and social organization by power” (Lugones, 2010, p. 746). Such resistance is often silenced, by denying the resisting subject voice, sense, visibility, legitimacy and authority (Lugones, 2010).

Today, some parents are found to actively negotiate how to prioritize education and prioritize the core values and practices they perceive as vital for “being Roma”, thus neither avoiding nor succumbing to the set rules and content of the schools (Hagatun, 2019b). Hence, further inquiry into this group’s various forms of agency of resistance can point us towards some decolonial options in education. However, this entails shifting the attention from “the fact that Roma resist” to exploring the qualities of their resistance, as well



as avoiding a singular focus on agency as resistance and thus overlooking the complexity of agency (Ahearn, 2001).

When researching power relations, the minority is often portrayed solely as the dominated part, while agents who represent the educational system are portrayed as the dominant party with their schemes and projects. Singular attention in research on liminal subjects as mere victims can reproduce silencing processes. Emphasizing agency makes it possible to recognize individuals and groups as able to formulate and enact their projects in the world, surpassing such simple understandings of systemic asymmetry. As described by Ortner (2011, p. 81) agency “is about people having desires that grow out of their own structures of life, including very centrally their own structures of inequality”. Ethnographic writing brings such agency to the fore.

## Methodology

### Fieldwork

The article draws on a rich body of material from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Oslo municipality between 2016 and 2019. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 37 children, parents, teachers and teacher/school assistant mediators. Observant participation was carried out in six schools, as well as in homes and at other relevant venues.

I first spent time in the community, interviewing parents and conducting observant participation. Being present in the field over time led to increased engagement in the daily challenges experienced by families, as well as new reflections on own privileged position as a white, former teacher, middle-class woman.

When starting up fieldwork in schools, employees in the Roma Mediator Service served as door openers (Fangen, 2004), by negotiating access to schools and by inviting me to shadow their daily work. While breaks gave opportunities to observe and engage in informal field conversations with children, more structured observations were conducted in classrooms and during one-to-one teaching activities.

One school assistant mediator became particularly invaluable. Belonging to the Roma community, she mediated interviews by contacting parents on my behalf. Gradually, she took on a more active role by formulating her own questions. After she was employed formally as a research assistant, we critically examined the interview-guide together, developing questions that could make sense to Roma children. Overall, she offered levels of contextualization that differed from my own.

Before interviews, children were informed that although their parents had given consent, they were free to give their own consent. Some children asked the research assistant in Romanes who I was before they answered. Thus, while the mediation of the research assistant opened for more informed consent, the presence of an “older Roma” might have limited children’s power to give free consent.

### Constructing portraits

The study rests within a critical paradigm, intersecting decolonial perspectives with the methodology of *portraiture*. Portraiture, developed within educational research by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), aims to capture the complexity and richness of human experience in social and cultural contexts, to convey the perspectives of the people negotiating those experiences, and to identify counter-narratives (Chapman, 2016). Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) argues the need to convey findings in a more understandable, not exclusive, language which encourages recognition, and which invites to reflection and action. Portraiture tries to blend “the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 6).

The involvement in the field provided a rich body of material, consisting of field notes, transcribed interviews, and observation protocols. Based on this, I portrayed Leah, Maria and Hannah. After making timelines consisting of material connected to each girl, I wrote synopsis’s identifying storylines, before enriching each portrait with details from field notes and quotes from interviews<sup>6</sup>. As argued by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005), many stories could be told and it is the portraitist who actively selects the themes to be used, who defines the rhythm of the narrative, and who strategically decides on points of emphasis. Thus, for the portraitist there is “a crucial dynamic between documenting and creating the narrative, between receiving and shaping, reflecting and imposing, mirroring and improvising (...). The effort to reach coherence must both flow organically from the data and the interpretive witness of the portraitist” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 10).

Although portraiture aims to disrupt traditional power relations between researcher and participants, the writing process meant a move from negotiating blended positions as researcher/friend/activist, as I did during fieldwork. As a portraitist, I held the power to define and ultimately produce - and reproduce - the knowledge I found most valuable. For example, the study rests on an inherent normative assumption that formal education is good to achieve, and this might influence what kind of agency I acknowledge in the portraits.

## Leah, Hannah and Maria

### Leah’s portrait

*Leah seems reluctant and disinterested when I first interview her and her cousin, placed in a quiet and comfy room at their school. Soon, I observe myself talking too much, struggling to create a “good atmosphere” and to get beyond the “me asking the questions, you*

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<sup>6</sup> Research in a small, close-knit community challenges how to balance transparency and participant’s confidentiality. Portraiture requires detailed accounts of context and events eminent to the storyline, and identity is here diffused by altering sensitive contextual information in ways that uphold the participant’s social positions (Fangen, 2004). Mediators who were part of the portraits, not working as mediators today, were informed about the content and helped to secure confidentiality.



answer"-mode. Finally, Leah says: "I do not find any of the activities in school interesting. They have nothing to do with my life". When asked if she wants an education, she states: "No, I do not need one. My future husband will provide for me so there is no use. I am only in school every day because my parents want me to". Mona, the school assistant mediator, has facilitated the interview. She is present but mostly silent. We do not really know each other yet. And I certainly do not know these girls at all, I think to myself. After the interview, Mona states: "They were cold; they do not know you yet", confirming that I conducted the interview way too soon.

In the following days, I come to know the girls better. Often, they linger inside the school halls during breaks with me and Mona, not wanting to enter the schoolyard. Leah is always quick to comment, playful. One day I am present when a relative pick them up from school. Everyone is stressed because of a violent conflict escalating within the community. Leah shows me some grim text messages her sister has received, watching me read with a serious and resigned expression in her eyes. Do I understand?

One evening, while walking by myself in a mall near their homes, the two cousins suddenly jump in front of me, trying to scare me, laughing. I take it as a sign of trust, that I will enjoy a stunt like that. And I do.

It occurs to me that I never see the girls spending time with other pupils. "We do not want to get to know the others", Leah explains. She just shrugs her shoulders when asked why not. As I observe the cousins in the classroom, I recognize "the disinterested Leah" whom I encountered during the initial interview. The cousins just sit there, close together. Sometimes whispering to each other, but never engaging in any activities in class. Once, the class plans a role-play and I see tasks like hairdressing and make up listed on the blackboard, activities I know the cousins enjoy. However, when tasks are distributed, they take no initiative and the teacher does not inquire what they wish to do. Later, when I ask Leah about this, she shrugs her shoulders. It strikes me that none of the teachers, while I observe, directly address the cousins' lack of involvement, as they are quick to do with other pupils in the class.

When I ask her main teacher about Leah's academic performance, she says: "Leah is very bright, clearly underachieving in school subjects". However, the teacher does not seem very concerned, as she has managed to establish a good relationship with the girls. "And I have learned so much about Roma culture," she states enthusiastically.

When I meet Leah again a few months later, I am astonished. The change is so remarkable and unexpected. She and her cousin have transitioned to secondary school, however not in the same class. I am told that, due to health issues, Leah's cousin has not attended school during the first weeks. Unlike Leah, who is there every day.

Before I enter the school ground, I have scheduled an interview through Leah's mother. Waiting for the class to return from break, I position myself near Leah's classroom, wanting her to choose whether to approach me. She immediately comes over and says: "Now, it's group work, and the rest of the day I have gymnastics. I'm so sorry! I didn't check the timetable when mum asked me if you could come!" I tell her that I enjoy

*just seeing her again and that, of course, she must attend class, not worry about the interview! She leaves me, eagerly chatting with some other girls as they venture into the classroom. I think to myself that I do not want to visit her at school again, or to schedule another interview. Even if I am curious. What has happened to Leah since the last time I saw her? However, I do not want to do anything that can disturb the situation; she must be allowed to “just be” in this, not being forced to reflect on past school experiences through my presence. Instead, I interview her new main teacher who confirms that Leah is at school every day, has gotten many friends in class and takes an active part in classroom activities. The teacher is positively surprised, having been told a very different story about Leah before the school started.*

*A few months later, a mediator tells me that Leah and her family have moved to another municipality because they lost their apartment. I feel frustrated. Will Leah be able and willing to “invest” at yet another school? I never find out.*

### **Hannah’s portrait**

*When I see Hannah for the first time, she tells me that her cousin is getting married soon. She excitedly shares details about the dress she has bought online and how she will have her hair and nails done. It is in the middle of a one-to-one lesson and I am observing as Hannah is taught basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics by Hilde, a teacher mediator. Hannah appears motivated and works hard during the lesson, receiving a lot of positive feedback from Hilde.*

*A few days later, I interview Hannah, but Mona, the research assistant, ends up asking most of the questions. “I was bullied at my former school. They said that I was living on the streets”, Hannah reveals, her voice flat. She started to dread school, and in the end, she did not attend at all. A few months back her parents decided to move to another part of town so that she could start over. Here she has not experienced bullying and the teachers know about her past and support her. “But I get so easily tired”, she says. She still cannot manage to go to school every day and often go home early. When asked about whether there are subjects that she enjoys, she mentions mathematics and gymnastics.*

*While observing Hannah and Hilde again, I wonder how Hannah experience life in an ordinary class. Does she manage to follow the instructions? Hilde tells me that she finds it difficult to help Hannah with tasks she gets as a 7<sup>th</sup> grader and that the books used in the one-to-one lessons are targeted at second and third graders. She thinks that Hannah often struggles in class. “In addition to lacking lacks basic skills in reading and writing, she also lacks sufficient skills in the Norwegian language to follow the instructions”. Thus, the school has applied for extra resources to provide Hannah with special needs education.*

*Later, I visit Hannah’s mother for an interview. The apartment is typical for the homes I have visited in the community, with white walls, modern furniture, extremely tidy and clean. She tells me: “I did not go to school in my childhood, I never learnt to read or*

write". This has made her adamant that her children will attend school. "It is so difficult when I do not understand", she says, showing me a letter, fearing it is from the Child Protective Service. I read it aloud to her and it turns out to be harmless. She tells me how frustrated and worried she has been as Hannah's former school did nothing to stop the bullying. She thinks that everything will work better at the new school, especially with the help of the teacher mediator.

A few days after, I am invited to Hanna's cousin's wedding. Here, I meet Hannah in the lovely purple dress I had heard so much about. She twirls it in front of me, so very beautiful and proud.

I see Hannah again a couple of months after she enrolled in secondary school. I join Anita, another teacher mediator, as she picks up Hannah from home in the morning. Hannah seems pleased to see us but then argues loudly with her father. She does not want to go, but he is determined. Anita tells me that this is a daily struggle. As Hannah lives just a few minutes' walk from school, Anita has tried to convince the school that they should pick up Hannah from home in the morning. "The girl suffers from school anxiety due to past bullying and because she lacks basic skills", she has told them. The school claims that parents are responsible for school attendance. Now, Hannah is only at school when Anita is present. Later, when discussing Hannah's school anxiety with a leader at the school, she expresses that it is rather a case of "culture refusing school".

Observing a one-to-one lesson, I find that Hannah seems interested as she and Anita read a fairytale book in Romanes and Norwegian. However, she struggles when she is asked to write something, easily venturing into other activities, laughing a lot.

A few months later, I am told that a leader in the mediator service initiated to group Hannah with a couple of other Roma pupils, hoping to make a positive change for them all. This is done as a last resort after the school refused to provide the special needs education that Hannah and the others had obtained a legal right to. "But they enjoyed each other's company so much that it was hard to concentrate", Anita explains. When they break up the group after a few weeks, the pupils refuse to go back to their ordinary classes. Since then, Hannah has rarely been to school. Anita feels conflicted, wondering if she took part in something wrong. "But is it better not to try anything at all?" she asks me.

### **Maria's portrait**

When meeting Maria for the first time, I cannot stop smiling. I immediately understand what Hilde, the teacher mediator, meant when describing Maria as easy to get to know. Maria laughs a lot and talks freely about her thoughts and feelings. She becomes the girl I spend the most time with during fieldwork.

According to both her main teacher and Hilde, Maria has developed considerably both socially and academically in the last two years. Maria agrees but expresses that the others in the class are still better than her. “But I’m the smartest one in my family, even if I’m not supposed to. I’m the youngest, you know”, she says, laughing.

Sometimes she brings up that girls and boys have different roles in the Roma community. “The girls are supposed to be tidy, clean, not dirty, always looking good, in that age. I must prepare myself to do those things, even if I cannot stand it... And you must be helpful, and I’m not!”

Once, she states: “I’m really Norwegian at school.” Except for sleepovers and birthdays, she takes part in most activities. She laughingly tells that Hilde, right after they met, wanted to do something fun with Maria while the rest of the class went skiing. “She was so surprised when the teacher told her that I too was skiing! She had never heard about a Roma pupil going skiing!”

She has experienced bullying at school, she says. “Once, I went by a boy. He just sat on the grass, hunched over his school bag, pretending to be asleep. I asked: “What are you doing?” He said: “I’m trying to find out how it is to live as you do”. I ask her how she feels when such things occur, does she tell the teachers? “No, I just put it behind me, there is no point thinking about it”, she answers. She seems more concerned about being misunderstood in class. She thinks that she often reacts in ways that are too fierce; that she loses control, that the language she uses is too violent and offensive. She does not mean to offend. “I’m also too active, not able to sit still or to be quiet all the time”. Hilde has helped her a lot, understanding why she struggles. She can talk to Hilde about everything, she explains.

Hilde thinks that the school has really tried to help Maria. But they lacked knowledge, failing to understand that Maria’s ways of behaving reflect how she is used to behaving within the Roma community. “Maria most often knows how expectations differ between home and school, but when provoked or eager, she reacts without thinking”, she says. She emphasizes that Romanes can be experienced by non-Roma as violent and sexualized if translated directly to Norwegian and that this leads to misunderstandings. Maria’s main teacher values Hilde’s knowledge: “I understand Maria better now. I realized that she lives in two separate worlds, so to speak”. She stresses that absence has never been an issue in Maria’s case.

When I meet Maria in her last week at elementary school, she has a crush on a boy there. “I will never act on it”, she says, stating that there are limits to what she can do according to the rules of purity in the Roma community. “But I think it is unfair that the other girls in class can have boyfriends, I really do”.

Maria looks forward to starting in secondary school but worries about getting grades for the first time. Hilde thinks she is well prepared; she is motivated and does well in all subjects. They have even started to speak some French during lessons. Because Maria already knows the language from travelling with her family, she wants French as a third language subject at her new school. Hilde wishes to help Maria after the transition. But

she will be on leave for months due to family commitments. She tries to persuade Maria to receive help from another teacher mediator in her absence. “No, I want to wait for you, I can manage”, Maria says.

After nearly a full school year, Hilde is finally back and I go with her to meet Maria at her new school. Hilde is devastated, as she has just learned that her employment in the mediator service will be terminated in a few weeks. How will Maria react after waiting for so long?

Maria meets us with the biggest smile, hugging us. She says that she had a lot of fun in class during the first months in secondary school. But then she was put in another class and she does not like her main teacher at all. “He is talking too much”, she complains. “I want teachers who can explain something, and then let us get to work”. She has also been forced to quit the French lessons as the teacher told her that she was not good enough. “But did the others in the class know French before they started? You knew a lot! What did the teacher mean?”, I ask. Maria cannot explain, she does not know.

“I have to get back on track because my grades are so bad now”, she says, looking sad. She often finds it difficult to get to school in time in the mornings and sometimes skips whole days. She is temporarily living with a relative because her family had to move on short notice. I ask her if this makes it difficult for her to attend school. “No, I live there because I did not want to change school!” I ask her if a recent conflict in the Roma community has affected her schooling somehow since I know her family is involved. “No, I’m so used to that, I don’t care anymore”, Maria explains.

I feel my heart sinking as she exclaims: “I’m so happy that you are back, Hilde. Now everything will be fine!” Hilde tells her that she has lost her position. I find myself fighting back tears, as I watch them both trying to compose themselves. “I will make it”, Maria finally says, “also without help. I will turn things around!” Again, Hilde tries to persuade her to receive help from another teacher mediator, but to no avail. “I will try to help you these last weeks I have left. I think your teacher really cares about you, we must talk to him”, she says. Maria looks doubtful.

Before leaving, I interview Maria who tells me that she still wants an education, to earn her own money. Maybe work as a hairdresser, or as a teacher mediator. However, she doubts that she will manage to stay in school long enough, or that she will get high enough grades. “I don’t want to marry early... And, you know, Roma boys, they decide everything”, she says. But she will respect her parent’s wishes.

I meet up with Hilde and on our way out of the school, we strike up a brief conversation with the teacher who had taught Maria French. “Well, Maria is a bit stupid”, she states. Hilde looks as shocked as I am. “No, she is not stupid at all!” she protests. “I meant that she is doing a lot of stupid things socially”, the teacher explains and goes on talking about the trouble caused by another Roma pupil who attended the school last year. Walking away, we wonder: Is this how Maria is perceived at this school?

My contact with Maria ended after Hilde lost her job and I never got to know if she managed to turn things around, all by herself.



## Discussion

The portraits convey findings in ways that challenge traditional forms of academic knowledge production and should thus be read on their own terms. Drawing on the portraits, the following discussion aims to address some of the issues that become visible when applying a decolonial lens, and that are salient in the overall empirical material. The aim of the following discussion is to foreground examples of (1) colonial structures and practices, (2) intersecting racializing, gendering and marginalizing colonial processes, and (3) how Roma agency can inspire decolonial options in education.

### Colonial structures in the educational system

#### *Cultural explanations*

As stated, low attainment of Roma pupils in formal education has mainly been explained by focusing on a “different culture” incompatible with formal education. Such “cultural explanations” render Roma as impossible to integrate and Roma pupils as either victims or problems (Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018). The portraits demonstrate that girls are positioned by teachers and school officials as holders of the “Roma culture” in racializing ways. In the portrait of Leah, her main teacher was clearly invested in getting to know her and learn about “Roma culture”. By focusing on the teacher’s actions rather than intentions, it becomes visible how she was exoticizing Leah, meaning essentializing “the other” in simplistic and stereotyped “positive” imaginaries of culture (Said, 1978). Depictions of Roma as free travellers unspoiled by civilization have long traditions in western literature and popular culture, shaping imaginaries of Roma (Hancock, 2002, 2004). For the teacher, Leah represented “something exciting” that she could learn about. Thus, exoticism, possibly intersected with the assumption that Roma children do not want education, confused the teacher’s responsibility to recognize Leah’s academic needs and to explore if and how she could be motivated to take part in learning activities. It might have been possible, as Leah demonstrated after the transition to secondary school. Even though it is difficult to disentangle exactly why Leah’s school engagement increased, one possible explanation is that she encountered teachers who were more interested in her academic performance than her “Roma culture”. Lack of academic expectations towards minority pupils is portrayed as a prominent form of structural racism in schools (e.g., Trøften, 2010).

Another striking example of how schools used cultural explanations is found in Hannah’s portrait where the school official confused school anxiety with “culture refusing school”. In her last year of primary school, Hannah thrived, finally encountering teachers who supported her. Her belonging to Roma was mainly recognized in the way she received support from the mediator service. However, in secondary school, the situation changed dramatically for the worse. As a former special needs teacher, I found that Hannah’s behavior of avoidance (not coming to school, leaving early, avoiding learning activities by turning to excessive humor, etc.) should be considered as typical for children



who feel unsafe at school (for example because of former racist bullying), and/or do not experience sufficient academic success (for example because of absenteeism and consequential poor skills, or not mastering Norwegian as a second language). Such experiences often lead to low self-efficacy, meaning that pupils avoid learning activities in fear of failing and to maintain their inner feeling of self-worth (Bandura, 1997). Hannah had over time developed decreased ability to master school, to a degree that formally qualified for special needs education. While the primary school recognized Hannah's agency as motivated in learning activities and applied for extra resources, the secondary school left the school mediator to deal with the situation. Thus, by resorting to cultural explanations, the school culturalized Hannah's behavior instead of recognizing the school's responsibility to provide the needed academic and emotional support.

#### *The assimilating workings of language*

Poor Norwegian language skills are often pointed out as a main reason for why Roma children struggle in school, as illustrated in Hannah's portrait. While parents stress the importance of children learning their mother tongue Romanes before being introduced to a second language, policy documents problematize the fact that few Roma children learn Norwegian before starting school (Hagatun, 2019a). I found that few Roma pupils received additional Norwegian language teaching and that teachers seemed unaware that the pupils most probably only spoke their mother tongue when starting school. Hence, Roma pupils are often recognized as bilingual when they, in fact, lack sufficient skills in Norwegian language to take full part in learning activities.

Seen in the light of decolonial perspectives, the descriptions above illustrate that the national educational language policy is based on the Norwegian language as the absolute norm. Minority languages, except Sami languages, are not regarded as valuable in themselves and are at best treated as a tool to learn Norwegian (Westrheim & Hagatun, 2015). Romanes mostly described as an oral language without a standardized orthography in Norway, is not even used as a tool, except by the few Romanes-speaking mediators. Hence, the recognition as a national minority language, and the state's inherent obligation to provide mother-tongue teaching, seem to count for nothing in the educational system, rendering the recognition to a symbolic act. The situation of Romanes thus illustrates how colonial knowledge discourses are embedded in the way majority language assimilates minority pupils. While other racializing processes in school often are caused by "blindness", this assimilation policy can be described as a conscious choice made by the state.

#### *Special measures opposing the norm*

The portraits illustrate the importance of the mediator service for Roma pupils' schooling, for example in how Maria's struggles in secondary school were reinforced when lacking this resource. However, affirmative action targeting a specific ethnic group opposes the overall national educational policy which, drawing on neoliberal ideology, addresses difference and inequality on individual rather than group level (Westrheim & Hagatun,

2015). The mediator service can thus be argued to constitute an important contribution to the educational system.

The portraits demonstrate that mediators are aware of some structural issues and challenge the schools. But, as illustrated in Hannah's portrait, mediators are often left to take too much responsibility for their pupils. In this case, the service ended up segregating Roma pupils from class in secondary school, illustrating how a lack of engagement from schools can entail unintended racist practices.

### **Intersecting colonial processes**

Drawing on Maria's portrait, the following discussion will focus on how gendering and racializing processes intersect in school, constituting gendered culturalization of ethnicity.

To live up to the western mainstream ideas of gender equality has been identified as a core marker for being recognized as "Norwegian" (Gullestad, 2002). Compared to other participants in the study, I found that Maria's expressed future dreams seemed most in line with the gendered majority norms. She did not want to marry early, and she wanted formal education to earn her own money and be independent. Thus, while her future dream aligns with majority ideals, her descriptions of the life that she thought was in store for her - to marry early - align more with gendered ideals described, by both Maria and other participants, as "the good life" for girls within the Roma community. Thus, Maria's future expectations can be described as somewhat conflicted.

Still, her agency when it came to education seemed clear in how she involved herself in learning activities in primary school. The teachers and teacher mediator recognized her as highly motivated, even though she could be "loud", etc. After the transition to secondary school, her behavior was described as increasingly problematic, also by Maria herself. She did not concentrate in class and she started to be absent from school. For me who had seen her in primary school, it was obvious that this behavior was due to: (1) her academic ambitions not being recognized, for example by the French teacher who told her that she did not fit into her class, and (2) lack of the emotional and academic support to negotiate structures she found difficult. However, the French teacher described her as stupid, comparing her with another Roma pupil who "behaved badly". Thus, in secondary school, Maria was stereotyped into an image of what was perceived as "a typical Roma pupil" (racialized) and "typical Roma girl" (racialized and gendered), behaving badly and not interested in school. The result was devastating, as her grades dropped and her belief in herself deteriorated. Her agency was still there, she wanted to turn things around. The question is if it was possible in a school where she was subjected to racism.

### **Roma agency: a possibility for decolonial options in education?**

#### *Agency in the portraits*

The portraits and the discussion above demonstrate the workings of colonial structures, within the educational system and the Roma community, in the girls' lives. However, when focusing on the constraining power of structures and norms, there can be a tendency to downplay the resistant capacities of individuals and groups (Ahearn, 2001). Still, agency should not be reduced to or equated with, resistance alone, as the agency that springs out of people's lived realities are more complex. While the following will focus on agency as resistance, it will also point out the danger of how emphasizing resistant behavior can lead to unintended reproduction of stereotyped understandings of Roma pupils.

First, I will give some examples of apparent resistance practices demonstrated in the portraits. All the girls at some point refuse school to a certain degree. While Maria and Hannah, for example, skipped school days in secondary school, Leah demonstrated several ways to oppose the system in primary school. In the first interview, she did not share much of her thoughts, clearly protecting herself from the inquiring gaze of the researcher. Later she showed me the threatening text messages, both inviting and testing me: "Do you relate to my reality?" Towards the teachers and me, she demonstrated that she was not interested in school activities. She did not want to get to know the others, non-Roma pupils, and did not engage in learning activities. Thus, while the oppositional behavior demonstrated by Maria and Hannah foremost seemed motivated by the fact that the new schools racialized and culturalized their academic and emotional needs, Leah seemingly actively positioned herself as resisting the school system and its dominating norms and expectations. However, as I addressed earlier, one should not explain oppositional behavior as part of Roma culture, as Leah's teachers did in primary school. The shift in Leah's behavior in secondary school demonstrates that agency is complex and that different structures hold constraining and enabling power.

This example demonstrates the danger in how a narrow focus on agency as resistance might lead to amplifying stereotyped assumptions about Roma and, ironically, exempt the educational system from inquiring into the working of its own colonial structures. To avoid culturalizing resistance, resistant behavior in school can never be regarded as produced and reproduced as a part of "Roma culture" or "belonging to Roma pupils", but must be seen as produced and reproduced by the educational systems colonial structures. Thus, by turning the focus towards the workings of the systems colonial structures, the girls' agency produces counter-narratives which challenge racialized, gendered and stereotyped meta-narratives depicting "the Roma culture" as the main explanation for why Roma pupils struggle in school.

#### *Agency of the Roma community*

I argue that the historical resistant agency of the Roma community represents a unique opportunity to critically examine and rethink dominant oppressing structures in the educational system. Norway continually views itself as not complicit in the history of colonizing others, thus making a claim to exceptionalism which constitutes the Nordic innocent self-image (Palmborg, 2009). This claim makes it possible for the educational system to regard itself as color-blind and equal, and to continually hold on to the imaginary of “the inclusive school”; generously offering inclusion to “the others” while not acknowledging that the premises for inclusion are set (Gressgård, 2005). Roma have historically resisted recognizing such constitutions of meaning and social organization by power set by the state. Thus, by actively positioning themselves as not conforming to set rules, the Roma community challenges the core values and organization of the educational system. Instead of recognizing the need for changing the system, Roma have been silenced and portrayed as “impossible” to include by holding a culture not seen compatible with formal education. Theory of resistance (Lugones, 2010) shifts the focus from the fact that Roma have resisted education, to why they have resisted, turning the lens towards how the colonial past shapes the general reproduction of power and knowledge, and how this reproduction is related to race and gender.

By recognizing Roma resistance as a possibility for decolonialization, the system can gain knowledge and the language needed to reveal and address the workings of intersecting racializing and gendering structures and to deal with blatant racism and racist bullying. Furthermore, by enquiring into both the resistance of the group and into why many Roma children do not experience school as relevant or possible, the curriculum and organization of schools can be challenged in ways that go beyond superficial adjustments. Because, the real decolonial possibility pointed out by Roma agency of resistance is this: How can all pupils and groups experience that they are genuinely taking part in coproduction of knowledge, instead of being positioned as receivers of set knowledge? This question challenges how the educational system should see its role in a diverse society; asking which and whose knowledge should be produced and reproduced in order to create equal opportunities for all.

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