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Education reforms for inclusion? Interrogating policy-practice disjunctions in early childhood education in Bulgaria

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines how early childhood educators, as policy implementers, perceive reforms in Bulgaria’s education system that occurred between 2008 and 2018. Both Roma and non-Roma educators participated in this project that compares perceptions of Bulgarian teachers in public schools and Roma educators in informal educational settings operated by NGOs and religious institutions. Applying intersectionality as a framework, the study draws from anti-Romaism as a particular form of racism that militates against the inclusion of Roma to examine whether and to what extent discourses of minoritized and racialised children are evident in the views held by the Bulgarian educators, resulting, in spite of educational reforms, in practices of pathologizing Roma children. All but one of the participating non-Roma teachers expressed anti-Roma views related to support for school segregation and perceptions of Roma children’s inherent academic inability and language deficiency. These views contrast with those of Roma educators, who pointed to major structural problems, such as poverty and segregation, that remain intact despite the reforms and thus have failed to reduce educational disadvantage.

**KEYWORDS**

Anti-Romaism; Bulgarian educational reforms; pathologization of Roma children; Roma inclusion

Although officially Roma account for about 5% of the total population in Bulgaria (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute, 2011), most scholars and NGOs perceive the census data as inaccurate and use Council of Europe estimations of 750,000–800,000, or about 10% – the highest percentage of Roma in an EU country. Roma are younger than the population overall, with members under 30 constituting 57.33% of the total population, compared to 28.11% ethnic Bulgarians in the same age group (Tomova, 2013). In addition, the 2010 EUROSTAT figures show that the poorest region in Europe is also the region with the highest concentration of Roma in Bulgaria (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute, 2011).

While equal and non-discriminatory education is a fundamental human right for every European Union (EU) citizen, across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), noninclusive public education systematically deprives Roma individuals of this right. There are large equity gaps in access, quality, and treatment of Roma and non-Roma students. Thousands of Roma children in Bulgaria, for example, are not enrolled in school, drop out before completing primary education or shortly afterwards, or do not receive inclusive quality education.
Along with causes such as poverty and poor command of the official language (Bulgarian), the 2018 UNICEF Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Bulgaria points at prejudice and discrimination as main factors creating disadvantage. Anti-Roma sentiments and attitudes hamper the inclusion of Roma across CEE in general and in Bulgarian society in particular. Romani scholar Kyuchukov (2015) defines anti-Romaism as “the processes/phenomena of discrimination, racism, ignorance, neglect, and marginalisation” against Roma (p. xi) that have contributed to vilifying their image in almost every European country. The 2016 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights survey identified that one in four Roma experienced racism and four in ten Roma felt discriminated against in the five years preceding the survey. Institutional forms of discrimination, including those manifested in education, have increasingly been a concern, with specific reference to direct and indirect roles in coproducing and reproducing discrimination in public law and policy (Bhabha, Matache, Chernoff, Fuller, & Lloyd McGarry, 2018; Matache, 2017b), reinforcing racialisation and thus impeding educational and career attainment (Bhabha et al., 2017; Center for European Policy Studies, 2017), and deepening structural societal inequalities (Kyuchukov & New, 2016; Ram, 2014).

A number of studies from across Europe provide examples of racist perceptions about Roma students (Dunajeva, 2017; Messing, 2017; Miskovic, 2013). Scholars argue that while policy initiatives like the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015 and EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies have institutionalised inclusion through policy, Europe’s measures have not yet improved social outcomes, nor have they ended school segregation (Messing, 2017; New, 2012a) or included Roma stakeholders in the discussion (Alexiadou & Norberg, 2017). A gap identified in the literature is the need to understand how local actors and implementers of reforms respond to policy developments (Brüggemann & Friedman, 2017). To narrow this gap in relation to Roma education, this article examines how early childhood educators, as policy implementers, perceive reforms to Bulgaria’s education system that occurred between 2008 and 2018. Educators’ perceptions about the nature and outcomes of these reforms serve as a backdrop to their views of their students, both Roma and non-Roma. Beliefs about children are rooted in culture and history (Rinaldi, 2006), are gendered, classed, and racialised (Burman, 2013), and reflect adults’ priorities. What educators believe about children “becomes a determining factor in defining their social and ethical identity, their rights and the educational contexts offered to them” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 64). To gain a deeper understanding of these views, Roma and non-Roma educators participated in this project that compares perceptions of Bulgarian teachers in formal schools and Roma educators in informal educational settings. Data were analysed through the lens of anti-Romaism, allowing the study to uncover how teachers’ beliefs about Roma impact their perceptions as implementers of policy pertaining specifically to Roma inclusion.

The article first reviews the steps taken by successive Bulgarian governments towards Roma inclusion and then reports on key education reforms between 2008 and 2018, including primary and early childhood education (ECE) initiatives. A section on the study’s theoretical framing that includes anti-Romaism as a vehicle for pathologizing Roma students follows this review. The findings present the perceptions of non-Roma teachers and Roma educators. Our analysis of key anti-Roma views expressed by the teachers and their potential to impact the project of Roma inclusion are discussed in
relation to Roma educators’ suggestions and the potential contribution of Roma grass-root initiatives to this process.

**Education reforms in Bulgaria between 2008 and 2018 and the reality of Roma Education**

**2008 delegated budget reform**

In the context of national policy attention towards Roma inclusion, Bulgaria’s education system has been marked by inequality. The system experienced its biggest decline in 2008, the year the government undertook a sweeping fiscal decentralisation (so-called delegated budget reform) promoting greater school autonomy and more efficient spending. The World Bank’s *Review of the Bulgaria School Autonomy Reforms* (2010) concluded that the introduction of “unified” per-student cost standards for education and delegated school budgets resulted in efficiency gains for schools and improved transparency of funds allocation. However, the financial optimisation led to school closures, peaking in 2008 when 340 schools closed, followed by another 44 schools closing their doors in 2009 (The World Bank, 2010).

Following Bulgaria’s National Action Plan on the Decade of Roma Inclusion Initiative 2005–2015 that assumed the “inclusion” narrative, particularly in the priority area of education, the National Strategy for Roma Integration (Republic of Bulgaria, 2012) formally addressed school segregation by giving the responsibility to end it to the local Ministry of Education and Science (formally known as “MON”). Even though the Strategy’s task was “enrolling and retaining in the educational system all Roma children and students, ensuring for them high quality education in a multicultural environment” (Republic of Bulgaria, 2012, p. 24), as many as 60% of Roma students in 2016 received education in schools where all or most students were Roma (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016). In 2017, MON reported that the overall number of closed schools in villages and small municipalities had reached 440. Both The World Bank’s 2010 document and a more recent analysis by the Centre for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance (Amalipe, as cited in Kolev, 2017) concluded that the closure of small schools affected mostly Roma children in rural areas and from impoverished families.

The adoption of policy documents such as the National Strategy for Reducing Early School Leaving (2013–2020), National Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities (2015–2020), National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2014–2020), National Strategy for Improving and Promoting Literacy (2014–2020) and the corresponding plans for their implementation are among the strategic steps carried out by successive Bulgarian governments between 2011 and 2018 to reduce dropouts and improve literacy among those most disadvantaged. In 2017, the Council of Ministers adopted Resolution 373 with the intent to create interinstitutional systems for clearer responsibilities of each institution in an attempt to address the social gaps and reduce school dropouts.

Despite such positive policy provisions, participation of Roma in education in Bulgaria has remained significantly lower in comparison to the general population. Reporting on the number of students enrolled in secondary institutions at the beginning of the 2017–2018 academic year, MON revealed that 2,763 of 42,221 students who
completed primary education in June 2017 did not continue into secondary education, making the dropout rate for that year 6.33% (Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science, 2017). In previous years, the National Statistical Institute reported that 3 to 4% of students dropped out each year. In comparison to the general EU trend, the proportion of young adults aged 18–24 who dropped out is higher: 13.8% in 2016 against the EU average of 10.7% (European Commission, 2017).

To remedy the situation caused by the 2008 delegated budget reform, the 2018–2019 academic year started with a revised school funding model aimed at supporting disadvantaged rural schools and children, who predominantly came from Roma communities. Unlike the 2008 budget model, which delegated money per student, the 2018 policy supports funding based on the number of classes in the school, not the number of students in the class – a main cause of underfunding in recent years. The policy considers municipal and regional differences and tackles further school dropout in the small rural regions. In a context of demographic decline, the new system of unified standards for financing differentiated by type of schools and not based on population and number of towns and villages with a population over 800 people appears to be a promising step, but its results are yet to be seen.

**Early childhood education policies affecting Roma inclusion**

Early education of Roma in Bulgaria remains below the EU target of 95% despite some improvement in participation – 66% in 2016 compared to 42% in 2011 (European Commission, 2017). Early on in the process of restructuring the education system, the government implemented compulsory preschool education for children aged 6 to 7 under the amendment of the National Education Law in 2003. The next step, introduced in 2010, extended compulsory preschool education to children aged 5 or 6, offered in separate kindergartens or as part of schools in special preschool classes (Article 69, paragraph 1).

The modification of the ECE level addressed the need to prepare all children to succeed when entering first grade (Article 74). Preschool education in Bulgaria is free except when a child repeats the preschool class (Article 75, paragraph 2).

The recent Law for Preschool and School Education, which took effect 1 August 2016, changed the provisions concerning the completion of grade, stage, and educational level. The reform targeted early school leaving by outlawing repetition of grade or retention in the same grade at the elementary level (grades 1–4) in cases where a child did not show proficiency in the quality markers for completing the grade (Article 124, paragraph 1). The most recent plans of the national government to address this issue are to extend compulsory preschool to age 4, as indicated in the 2018 reform.

Despite improved participation of Roma children in ECE, equity gaps remain. In 2015, 8% of Bulgarian students identified as speaking another language at home. The performance gap between this group and those whose home language is Bulgarian is significant – 79 points in science and more than two years of schooling (European Commission, 2017). This gap is the highest in the EU. The recent *Midterm Review of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies* concludes that “dedicated financial support is required to help the most deprived families with indirect costs of early childhood education (fees, food, clothing, transport, etc.)” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017, p. 8).
Although the Bulgarian context has not received sufficient attention, several scholars have argued for the termination of school segregation (Kolev & Zahariev, 2007; Russinov, 2004). Petrova (2004), a critic of inadequate policy, concludes: “School desegregation is the first step, and the stepping-stone for Roma integration. Without it, school success in a ghetto school would not make much difference” (p. 21).

**Theoretical framework**

We view the processes of school segregation, or creating ghetto schools for Roma students, as pathologizing – processes by which people who belong to a particular group “are seen by a more powerful group as abnormal” (Heydon & Iannacci, 2009, p. 3). We concur with Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005) that although pathologizing affects individuals, the individuals themselves are not the targets; rather, the targets are the markers (e.g., race, language, gender, ethnicity, ability) that position the individual socially in relation to the dominant group/norm in any given society and period of time.

In exploring anti-Romaism as an instrument of pathologizing Roma students in educational contexts, specific attention has been paid to how it has sustained racial school segregation. Employing the anti-Romaism concept, a large body of research argues that Roma’s disparate outcomes in education across Europe have resulted from the unwillingness of national states to desegregate their education systems because of embedded racism against Roma (Greenberg, 2010; Miskovic, 2013; New, 2012a, 2012b; Petrova, 2004; Surdu, 2003). Claveria and Alonso (2003) argue that Roma children are 15 times more likely to be considered “intellectually deficient” (p. 565) than non-Roma children, while Schvey, Flaherty, and Higgins (2005) state that the roots of Roma poverty are in the “Roma education gap” (p. 1163) created mainly by exclusive education institutions, a gap that serves as a foundation for Roma’s poverty. In this paper, we understand the historical and current misrepresentations of Roma as biologically and culturally inferior (e.g., labelling them as lazy, uneducated, uncivilised) to exemplify the practice of pathologizing that perpetuates racial institutional treatment against them. Drawing from this understanding, we pay attention to concepts emphasising the systemic nature of anti-Romaism (Matache, 2017a) that has “as its core the assumptions that Roma are an inferior and deviant group” (Center for European Policy Studies, 2017, p. 9).

However, anti-Romaism alone does not explain the achievement gap for Roma children. This prompts us to explore intersectionality as a theoretical framework because it explains “how multiple social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, SES [socioeconomic status], and disability intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism) at the macro social-structural level” (Bowleg, 2012, p. 1267). Intersectionality is therefore “a way of understanding and analysing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2). Focusing on Roma “ghetto schools,” Greenberg’s (2010) study, for example, highlighted the common practice of placing Roma in separate schools or classes after diagnosing them with “light mental retardation” (p. 936). The overrepresentation of Roma pupils in low-quality schools has been found to affect children’s “sense of being wronged” (New, 2012a, p. 133), essentially different, and inferior.
Souto-Manning and Rabadi-Raol (2018) applied the intersectionality framework to their review of quality in ECE over the past 30 years, providing important insights about multiply minoritized and racialised children. The authors identified three assumptions about these children on which the discourse on ECE quality in the USA was constructed: inferiority, deficit, and cultural difference:

- **Inferiority**: Children from multiply minoritized backgrounds are seen as biologically inferior – as having smaller brains and lower IQs than white children, who are seen as racially superior.
- **Deficit**: Children from multiply minoritized backgrounds are seen as experiencing poor upbringings in their homes and communities and developing a deficit – whether linguistic or cultural – for example, having a word gap, being at risk, needing a head start to succeed in schooling (an idea grounded in the colonial monocultural, monolingual norms imposed ethnocentrically and violently onto them).
- **Cultural difference**: Children from multiply minoritized backgrounds are seen as different from the colonial monocultural, white, monolingual norm (p. 205).

Applying intersectionality as a framework, our study draws from anti-Romaism as a particular form of racism that militates against the inclusion of Roma to examine whether and to what extent discourses of minoritized and racialised children in ECE illustrate anti-Roma views held by Bulgarian educators that inform practices of pathologizing Roma children.

**Methodology**

This article draws on data collected as part of a larger ethnographic study that had four distinct points of data collection: 2011, 2012, 2014, and 2017. The goal of the extended project was to analyse the complex factors leading to further marginalisation of Roma youth during and after the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015) with a focus on the Balkan region, particularly Bulgaria. The selection of towns and educational institutions included in the study was based on the size of settlements (towns with larger Roma populations) and school type (predominantly Roma). The research followed a qualitative research approach integrating field observations and open-ended interviews that lasted about an hour to an hour and a half.

**Participants and data collection**

Following ethics approval, the first author observed two elementary-level classrooms (grades 1 and 2) over four months in 2011. Gradually, the researcher gained entry to the communities in the three towns with the help of Roma NGO collaborators and school staff (Lambrev, 2017). The data presented in this paper were also collected through three subsequent research phases in the summers of 2012, 2014, and 2017.

Several methods of participant recruitment were used, including (a) the snowball method (the researchers started by interviewing one teacher per school and through them recruited other participants); (b) community observations in the Roma settlements,
identifying Roma informal educators and inviting them to participate in the study; and (c) online initial contacts with potential respondents and then in-person meetings and interviews when the researchers were back on the sites in Bulgaria. These recruitment techniques provided a convenience sample that consisted of 21 formal teachers (17 female, 4 male) who were ethnic Bulgarians working with Roma children in preschool and early elementary levels (grades 1–3) and three informal Roma educators – one staff member of a Roma-education-focused NGO (a 46-year-old male); a coordinator of a programme aiming to integrate Roma students into regular Bulgarian schools (a 27-year-old male working in the program for 11 years); and a 54-year-old male educator who was the founder of and a teacher in an informal preschool program adjacent to the Evangelical church in the Roma settlement. All interviews were conducted in Bulgarian and translated into English.

Analysis

The data analysis was both deductive (concept driven) and inductive (Gibbs, 2009), directed by the study’s aim to gain insights into the perceptions of teachers and educators on recent policy. The respondents were asked to share their views about the effectiveness of education reforms in relation to Roma students’ education. The researchers were particularly interested in examining how the formal and informal learning spaces, through the perceptions of main actors (non-Roma and Roma educators) about these education reforms provided learning opportunities or disadvantages for Roma children. The broad categories that were based on the research design were then analysed through identification of descriptive codes and inductive concepts emerging from participants’ perspectives (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). These codes were used to analyse the transcripts and field notes to understand how non-Roma teachers and Roma educators perceived the education reforms. Lastly, analytical reflections and concept maps were created to elaborate on the emerging themes and to perform a cross-site analysis to systematise answers and identify parallels. To ensure trustworthiness of the conclusions, the team used member checks by sharing analytical understanding of the data with the participants.

Findings

The two groups of participants shared the view that the education reforms have not been effective in helping Roma students; however, they disagreed about why the policies did not work. The non-Roma teachers described Roma as incapable and unwilling to adapt to the values and rules of the Bulgarian school. Four main anti-Roma ideas supported this view: (1) the belief that school segregation was appropriate; (2) Roma’s perceived inherent academic inability; (3) Roma’s perceived language deficiency; and (4) perceptions that ECE policy makes the situation worse. These racist views contrast with the perceptions of Roma educators who, although unanimous in their views of the inadequacy of the reforms, pointed to the major structural problems, such as poverty and segregation, that remained intact despite them and thus failed to reduce educational disadvantage.
Anti-Roma ideas in the non-Roma teachers’ perceptions

Belief that school segregation is appropriate
The teachers resisted the policies’ focus on integration and expressed support for school segregation. In one teacher’s view, Roma children would be much better off attending special programmes with simple, watered-down curriculum that would prepare them to enter trade schools, not the regular, academically oriented high schools:

> These children [the Roma] must have special programs for children with special needs. These programs should be very, very rudimentary, simple, very simple, because now we are pretending to teach them the content that is required of us, the same as we teach in the Bulgarian schools; we report that we have taught them, but we have not. (grade 4 teacher, mixed school, 2017)

Another teacher said: “If I had power, I would stop the integration altogether” (grade 1 teacher, Roma school, 2011). She believed that segregated schools with a special program for children whose first language is not Bulgarian have a better chance to educate Roma children. In this teacher’s view, the main purpose of educating Roma was teaching them literacy and basic skills needed for the trades.

Another teacher was adamant that until the government adopts a new approach to educating Roma by delivering a simplified curriculum and abandoning “inadequate” EU recommendations for desegregation, “the main goal of making the Roma ‘literate’ will not be achieved” (grade 1 teacher, Roma school, 2011).

A teacher who worked in a mixed/desegregated school justified segregation by saying that many Roma children did not want to go to the regular “Bulgarian” schools because they experienced peer rejection. This rejection did not always take a violent form. In fact, there were no conflicts between the Roma and non-Roma children because there was no interaction.

> They were simply isolated. No one wanted to interact with them; they were on one side and that’s it. And why would anyone want to interact with them … they are like savages, no hygiene habits, or proper behaviors in the classroom. A nightmare, really. There is absolutely no benefit to go to school with the Bulgarian children. (grade 4 teacher, mixed school, 2017)

Perceptions of lack of cleanliness were used to support the idea that Roma are unsuitable for mixed schools. In response to Roma children’s perceived lack of personal hygiene, the elementary school teachers made it their priority to teach them such habits, including washing their hands and faces, using the bathroom, and combing their hair. As one teacher put it:

> Elementary school teachers have two major goals for the Roma students: (1) to learn to use the bathroom properly, and (2) to learn to write their names … . Because this is the first time, in grade one, when they get out of the pig sty. (elementary afterschool program teacher, Roma school, 2017)

As a result of prioritising personal hygiene habits for their Roma students, academic expectations were set quite low.
**Perceived inherent academic inability**

Most teachers used their beliefs about Roma’s inherent intellectual inability to justify their belief that segregation was appropriate. The prevailing opinion was that integration is imposed by the EU and enforced by officials who do not know the local context and have never worked with Roma children. One teacher went so far as to suggest that “[Bulgaria] should not be listening to every stupid suggestion the EU has. I cannot understand . . . Their Gypsies are different there” (grade 3 teacher, Roma school, 2017). Another teacher stated:

This integration is done by people who have never, absolutely never worked with Roma children from the Roma mahala, have not set foot in a Roma mahala. Impressive statements are made, but in reality, the practice is very different. (grade 2 teacher, Roma school, 2011)

Most of the teachers interviewed saw the problems Roma children have adapting to school mainly from the point of view of their “inherent” short attention span, inability to follow school rules, and poor overall intellectual capacity. Two statements made by elementary school teachers stood out: “How are we to teach them? In my view, they [the Roma students] cannot be integrated because they are intellectually so far behind the Bulgarian children” (grade 1 teacher, Roma school, 2011); and: “They simply don’t have the academic capacity . . . And why do they need to read? I can see them, their lives are about the horse and the waggon” (grade 3 teacher, Roma school, 2017).

Another teacher noted a perceived “laziness”: “It’s difficult. We are teaching [in the Roma school] things that children in the Bulgarian school have learned a long time ago. And there is something else; the [Roma] ethnos is lazy” (grade 2 teacher, Roma school, 2014). When the researcher pointed out that they had noticed during fieldwork small children washing clothes and doing housework, the teacher opposed the perception that such activities aim to teach the value of hard work: “No, no! This is not to teach them hard work! The parents are making them do that so they become good brides and grooms.”

**Perceived language deficiency**

Not speaking Bulgarian at home was described by the interviewed teachers as a major impediment to Roma children’s success. It was not only that they were not speaking Bulgarian at home; the parents who did not work outside of the Roma community were seen as refusing to speak Bulgarian, which made the teachers’ task very difficult, especially those who taught grade one: “They don’t want to speak Bulgarian, which is very difficult for the teachers. When the parents speak Bulgarian and work among Bulgarians, we don’t have such problems” (grade 1 teacher, Roma school, 2014).

**Perception that ECE policies make the situation worse**

Because Roma were perceived as incapable of being properly educated (i.e., lacking academic abilities) and unwilling to accept the values of Bulgarian school and culture (i.e., refusal to learn the Bulgarian language), two specific ECE policies were seen by the teachers as unnecessary and even deteriorating the education of all students: (1) prohibiting retention from grades 1 to 4, and (2) lowering the mandatory preschool start to age 5. A prevailing view in these conversations was that the two policies were made to help administrators and policy makers deal with the “mess of Roma education”
(grade 3 teacher, Roma school, 2017), but in reality, they prevented the children from acquiring basic knowledge at the elementary level.

First, the teachers saw the outlawed retention in elementary school as being introduced specifically for the Roma: “Traditionally, there was only a negligible number of Bulgarian students ever needed to repeat elementary grades. This new policy doesn’t really help anyone because even when a [Roma] student fails a class, they still go on to the next one” (grade 2 teacher, 2017). However, while the policy helped Roma students get diplomas, it harmed their chances to learn how to read and write: “Never mind if they can read, count, or can’t even write their names. The school promotes them to the next grade” (elementary afterschool program teacher, Roma school, 2011); “They don’t learn anything this way” (grade 2 teacher, Roma school, 2014).

Second, teachers were unanimous that the “no retention” policy prompted most teachers to put less effort into teaching Roma children, who did not want to learn anyway, according to the teachers’ beliefs, contributing in this way to their low achievement. For instance, a teacher who had worked with Roma students at the elementary level for 20 years stated:

Most of my colleagues don’t bother teaching [Roma] students how to read and write because the child will pass the grade anyway. If the policy allows for retaining the child at least in 4th grade, teachers will try harder, because who wants to work additionally with a failing child during their summer break? (2017)

Similar perceptions were extended in regard to the reform affecting mandatory preschool education at age 5. The overall feeling was that the reform was designed specifically for Roma children and “takes away” Bulgarian children’s childhood:

This new reform is not intended to help Bulgarian children because they don’t need additional support – they can speak Bulgarian language and can read and write even when they start first grade. Why do they take away a year from my child’s childhood just because of the mangali? (grade 2 teacher, Roma school, 2014)

However, the reform was not seen as helping the Roma children because there was no specific bilingual Bulgarian/Roma program that would “benefit Roma children’s vocabulary – their greatest weakness.” This is the greatest contradiction:

A better solution is for all children to start preschool at 6, but to develop a program for these [Roma] kids not just to play games but through such games to build their Bulgarian vocabulary. Their biggest issue is the lack of Bulgarian vocabulary. I read a poem to them about a linden tree and they do not know what this means. (grade 2 teacher, Roma school, 2011)

Compared to teaching Bulgarian children, most of whom can read, write, and do simple arithmetic before they enter grade one, teaching Roma students was equated to heavy physical labour by one of the participants:

It’s especially difficult when I teach first grade. The first two months I go home after work so tired as if I lifted heavy stones all day. Each kid cries for attention; each asks for help – Missis, Missis … I hold each kid’s hand to teach them how to write and while I work with one kid another one cries behind me. We teachers are galloping like horses in class. (grade 1 teacher, Roma school, 2014)
Roma educators’ perceptions

In contrast with the teachers’ perceptions, the data gathered from the Roma educators suggested there is a major gap in the reforms – a lack of attention to structural problems such as poverty and a lack of support for desegregation.

A Roma coordinator in a mixed school for 11 years reflected on the emotional struggles of Roma children when they are “taken out of the ghetto” to start attending the regular school in the city:

Children cry when they start in the mixed preschool. They have not had a chance to see the city and the school before they start first grade. To be honest, they have not seen a desk, blackboard, chalk, a notebook. They don’t speak Bulgarian and are away from their family. And the Bulgarian parents don’t make it easier. They don’t want their child to sit on the same desk with a Roma child. (2014)

From the perspective of another Roma educator, poverty was the main reason for many families to enrol their children in the neighbourhood’s segregated school:

The segregated school on the other hand, as well as the rural schools, offered many incentives for the parents, irrespective of the low quality of education offered. They provided firewood, they accepted children’s absences without valid reasons, children could attend barefoot and dressed however they could, and they were also close to home and able to have meals there. Poverty and unemployment are the basic reason for parents to choose the neighborhood school. (Roma NGO educator, 2014)

To address the ineffectiveness of formal schools, the Roma educators in the study offered grass-root ECE initiatives supporting Roma children within their communities. One of the educators, who worked in a community health centre, started an informal afterschool program. She provided Bulgarian language help, especially for the small children:

When the teacher speaks their language, like in my case I speak Turkish and most of our Roma here are Millet, Turkish Gypsies, it’s helpful. When I help them with homework, I can translate things they don’t understand [in Bulgarian]. It’s like how they study English [as a foreign language] at school … I give them instructions in Turkish, then I repeat in Bulgarian. (Roma educator, informal program, 2011)

Another practical solution was a bilingual program located in a church in the Roma neighbourhood that prepared the children for entering first grade. The educator discussed the value of bilingual support:

Because our children are bilingual, there is a need of teachers who speak their language and can translate for them, especially when they are really young, in preschool or first grade. What I do in my program is explaining the task or the lesson in the Roma language and then in Bulgarian. I try to speak mostly in Bulgarian, but when I see that children do not understand, I switch to Romani. How else a small child would learn Bulgarian when their home language is Romani? (Roma educator, 2014)

The educator reflected on the fact that all teachers in the nearby Roma school were Bulgarians and spoke only Bulgarian. The lack of such support had an even deeper, stigmatising effect on the Roma communities because teachers often attributed children’s lack of attention and engagement to an intellectual disability: “And when our
children cannot understand what the teacher says in Bulgarian and can’t follow their instructions, the teachers say, “Stupid children. They cannot be taught of anything.”

The three Roma participants in the study stressed the need to hire Roma personnel in schools to provide acculturation and second-language support: “If they hire local Roma educators, our children would benefit tremendously” (Roma educator, informal program, 2012). The Roma NGO coordinator also expressed his strong conviction that the position of Roma teacher assistants/coordination in schools is extremely efficient, especially at the elementary level. They were paid by Roma organisations, but the local authorities were not interested in maintaining them. In his view, Roma coordinators would facilitate the work with Roma children in preschool and first grade, as teacher assistants were “indispensable and valuable intermediaries between the teachers and the parents in supporting children’s adaptation to the new school environment” (2014).

Discussion

The interview data presented in this article reveal that the Roma are still seen as a “problem” and a “burden” to the Bulgarian school system. As a societal institution, schooling is seen as a platform to “ civilise” the children who “come out of the pig sty,” and the role of early childhood teachers is to teach hygiene. This view clearly positions Roma students as *hominis educandi* – “a collective human subject to be educated, improved, and enculturated by learning the requirements of the dominant society” (Trubeta, 2013, p. 16). This systematic portrayal of Roma as not human and “less than equal” (Hancock, 2002) serves as a tool of *gadjo*-ness that misrepresents this heterogeneous population.

Pathologizing Roma children: non-Roma educators’ beliefs and practices

The notion of difference as deficiency dates to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus who, in his book *Histories*, written in 440 BC, called people who were different (from the Greeks) barbarians (Cole & Gajdamaschko, 2007, p. 195). This notion prevails in the Bulgarian teacher discourse, as evidenced by the use of descriptors such as “savages” when referring to their Roma students, and clearly indicates their perception of their students. The interviews revealed that Roma children, not unlike children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds elsewhere, were subjected to pathologizing (Heydon & Iannacci, 2009). Providing evidence to support Souto-Manning and Rabadi-Raol’s (2018) analysis of ECE discourse regarding minoritized and racialised children, the interviews with non-Roma educators demonstrated how their assumptions of inferiority, deficit, and cultural difference influenced participating teachers’ narratives. Roma children’s perceived biological inferiority is reflected in narratives depicting them as “savages” who “simply do not have the capacity” to learn. At the same time, Bulgarian children were seen as superior in their abilities (e.g., the statement that Roma students are “intellectually so far behind the Bulgarian children”). The view that Bulgarian children are much higher intellectually speaks to a new form of racism that is “based not on biological heredity but the ‘insurmountability of cultural differences’” (Balibar, 1991, p. 21). It is clear, therefore, that a dominant theme in the teachers’ anti-Roma views was not only biological inferiority but also the belief that Roma’s lifestyles contradict Bulgarian ones. This cultural form of racism, which Balibar calls “neo-racism,” often postulates a perceived “harmfulness of abolishing frontiers” (p. 21) in the cultural sense. The non-
Roma respondents strongly defended cultural frontiers by supporting school segregation and opposing governmental initiatives to end it. Their views of Roma children as having bad hygiene, lacking good parenting, and having an “inherently” short attention span and language deficiency prevented them from seeing the potential of the reforms to help Roma overcome their educational disadvantage. On the contrary, the government policies were seen as doomed to fail because (1) the government and the EU fail to recognise the cultural and biological inferiority/incompatibility of Bulgarian Roma, and (2) the Roma culture itself is unable – and moreover, Roma people refuse – to integrate because of their “inherent” cultural handicap.

The interviews also demonstrate the non-Roma teachers’ belief about Roma children’s linguistic deficiencies – their “lack of vocabulary in Bulgarian” and “not knowing how to read and write” because their parents are “illiterate and speak only Romani language at home.” In this sense, despite the consistency of the language of the National Education Law 2003 that upholds minority children’s right to learn their mother tongue as part of the preschool curriculum while they are also assisted in learning the official Bulgarian language (National Education Law, 2003, Article 5, paragraph 2, and Article 8, paragraph 2), the interviews revealed that “monolingual norms [are] imposed ethnocentrically and violently onto them” (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018, p. 205). Roma children’s cultural difference was also defined as a deficit because the children are seen as lazy, unable to follow school rules, and lacking interest in school altogether because of their cultural expectation that they need to be “trained” to be “brides and grooms” before learning anything else.

This deficit view of Roma children’s abilities is an expression of institutionalised anti-Romaism and, as previous research shows, is not unique to the Bulgarian teachers in this study. Levinson (2008), for instance, concluded that “the highly structured, hierarchical, rule-governed culture of school is both alien and repressive” (p. 247), and in a 2017 study in Serbia, Bhabha and her colleagues found that teachers’ low expectations were often not interpreted as discrimination and “may even pass unnoticed because they are so endemic” (p. 212).

The assumption of biological inferiority and cultural and linguistic deficits positions minoritized students as being “at risk for failure” (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995, p. 2), as teachers’ interviews indicate. Segregated schools are seen as more appropriate for Roma children. The teachers’ discussions of Roma’s inability to learn in regular school, as well as recommendations such as the need to develop a simplified curriculum specifically for the Roma schools and to direct Roma students towards the trades, reveal a cultural racism that fuels the desire to maintain the groups’ frontiers.

This study’s findings point to another conclusion as well: Teachers used anti-Roma arguments to express disagreement with how the government approaches Roma ECE. We saw how one teacher called the EU directives for Roma inclusion “stupid” and many other teachers discussed a perceived incompatibility of Roma with EU (Western) “civilised” ways of life and schooling. In other words, in the teachers’ views, those who make policies have not “set foot” in a Roma neighbourhood and never communicated with Roma, hence, tend to implement inadequate reforms. However, these same anti-Roma sentiments prevented the teachers from realising their own responsibilities. While they found reasons for the ineffectiveness of education reforms in both the Roma culture and government’s approach, the teachers did not see their role as agents...
of support and positive change. In its report *One in One Hundred*, Harvard FXB Centre for Health and Human Rights (Bhabha et al., 2018) found that only one percent of the Roma students in Serbia continue on to college; the report stresses that “distinctive factors for educational success for the 1 percent are teachers’ belief in a Romani student’s intellectual capacity and teacher/peer support in facing discrimination” (p. 28). Similar findings are reported by Alexiadou (2019), who reflects on the critical role of mainstream teachers in the success of Roma students’ educational transitions. Only one teacher in our study supported the government’s reforms and expressed a belief in Roma children’s abilities. She described how she put extra effort into her work (e.g., extensive preparation, finding supporting materials on the Internet) and highlighted the importance of support and mentorship: “If I can teach all my Roma students well, then every teacher can do it. It only needs a belief and commitment. We [teachers] have to be committed to do more than the required minimum because Roma families are poor and cannot support their children.” The teacher concluded: “The biggest punishment for my [Roma] students is to tell them I am disappointed with them. They know that I believe in them.” Even though the sample for this study was small, this teacher’s views suggest that there are some non-Roma teachers in Bulgaria who support Roma students.

**Community and grass-root work: the role of Roma educators**

Contrary to Bulgarian teachers’ views, the Roma educators saw the challenges Roma children face in first grade as a societal/systemic problem – the existence of segregated Roma ghettos and the fact that thousands of Roma children never have the chance to get out of these ghettos. These educators held the view that grass-root programs and activities can help the children navigate exclusionary contexts. They developed supports in mainstream language acquisition at the preschool level, organised informal after-school help, and coordinated targeted integration of children in a mixed school.

The efforts of Roma educators who participated in the study to provide Bulgarian language support and early literacy point to a gap between formal education policy and real community needs. As the interviews demonstrated, both Roma and non-Roma educators identified the need for Bulgarian language support at the elementary level. However, while the Roma educators’ approach was to provide second-language support and instruction, the Bulgarian teachers seemed to lack respect for Roma children’s home language and culture. The analysis of interview data, therefore, points to the need for the Bulgarian education system to look at the students’ “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) as an asset that is fundamental for the children’s cognitive and social development and sustained academic and life success. As underlined in a 2002 World Bank report, attracting and retaining Roma personnel in the school system “can also provide important role models for children” (p. 33).

Unfortunately, such grass-root initiatives were not seen by the Bulgarian school authorities as a model of bottom-up practices that can support the success of Roma students. This study found that grass-root efforts remain single cases where individual Roma activists support the children for no pay and on their own time – something that remains largely invisible to the mainstream system.
Conclusion

The contrasting views of Roma and non-Roma participants in this study point to another consequence – the education reforms in the last ten years have not created conditions for Roma and Bulgarian educators to come together and focus efforts to support the educational success of Roma children. While the reforms were identified by all respondents as not working for either students or teachers, it is evident that the goal to make the post-socialist schools more efficient has brought more negative than positive results. It appears that one missed opportunity so far has been the possibility to engage Roma educators in the formal education process. One of the Roma participants reported that he has long tried to get a teaching position but has repeatedly received rejections. In 2018, the European Commission issued the results of a “Eurobarometer” survey conducted in several member states with higher Roma populations. In Bulgaria, the share of mainstream respondents who said they were comfortable working with a Roma person was one of the lowest, 43%, as opposed to Spain and Portugal, for instance (70% and 66%, respectively). In that sense, Balibar’s (1991) notion of neo-racism – “racism without race” – in contemporary Europe provides insights into how racism works in the context of policy reforms in Bulgaria. Evidence of racism is found across the interview data; some examples include the lack of Roma school staff, views of Roma as “intellectually deficient,” and the belief in the “inadequacy” of top-down EU-influenced education policy and curriculum that, in the teachers’ views, cannot “civilise” the Roma. The perception about mandatory preschool at age 5, for instance, reveals a gap between policy and practice. In the teachers’ views, this is an unproductive government step that not only does not help the Roma, due to their “inability” to learn, but is also seen as taking away the childhood of Bulgarian children. Furthermore, without programs in place to support the acquisition of Bulgarian language, such measures will most likely not yield the intended results.

Teachers’ narratives opposing school desegregation as inadequate policy show further how teachers have transferred socially constructed categories of otherness into their practices in ways that pathologize Roma children. In that sense, the findings of this study help theorise how public institutions and actors within education become a platform for racial discourses to maintain cultural frontiers. More importantly, it shows how such gaps increase perceptions of cultural superiority and deepen neo-racist views. The educators’ perceptions of the outcomes of the educational reform in Bulgaria paint a complex, multidimensional picture that raises more questions than provides answers, showing that the successes of educational reforms in societies in transition cannot be measured with simple standards and variables. In each context, the specific challenges and difficulties that the state and national educational institutions face are unique and require consistent efforts to be resolved.

Notes

1. The term educators is used broadly here to include teachers in elementary schools and educators in informal early learning contexts (e.g., NGOs and religious institutions).
2. For the purpose of clarity, when comparing the two respondent groups’ perspectives, we use the term teachers to refer to formal teacher participants and educators to denote Roma grass-root educators who do not have formal teaching credentials.
3. An old form of the word *neighbourhood*, nowadays often used to denote Roma quarters.
4. The policy stipulates that if a student is retained, they should work individually with a teacher during the summer to acquire the material.
5. Extremely derogatory name for Roma people (plural form).

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