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Education of Roma in Sweden – an interplay between policy and practice
This article intends to analyse the interplay between policy and practice as concerns the education of Roma in Sweden. First, the article will give a historical background to the present situation and the recognition of Roma as a national minority describing the various Romani groups that migrated to Sweden during the different historical periods. Second, it will give an overview of the social, economic, and educational situation highlighting the heterogeneity of Roma in the country. Finally, the paper will present a general overview of the educational situation of the Roma giving examples of some good practices and concluding with some remarks and future prospects. It is important to note on the onset that Sweden currently does not allow for ethnic registration and therefore the figures based on ethnic affiliations are approximations.

1. Historical background

Since the 16th century there have been several Romani groups migrating to Sweden. The result of this migration has led to a heterogeneous population characterized by linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity today. Written references to Romani peoples in Sweden first appear in 1512 (Thesleff, 1904, p. 10-11), though it is likely that there may have been small travelling groups or individual extended families in the Nordic countries before this time, frequently misidentified as ‘heathens’ and ‘Tartars’, in Swedish ‘tattare’

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the term “Tartar” referred to any people leading a migrant, vagrant life in groups, often in families. The first Romani migrations comprised two groups: the Travelers (today known as resande in Swedish) and the Kaale, often described as Finnish Roma. Historically the terms ‘zigenare’ for Roma, and ‘tattare’ for Travelers were used interchangeably to refer to one and the same group during different periods of time. It was not until the end of the 19th century that they were considered as two separate groups by the Swedish authorities (Montesino Parra, 2002; Sjögren, 2010).

A second migration followed the abolition of ‘Gypsy’ slavery in Wallachia and Moldavia in 1856-61. Towards the end of 19th century and beginning of the 20th century groups of Kelderash Roma migrated to Sweden through Finland (cf. Taikon, 1963). These Kelderash Roma, who are today often known as Swedish

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1 Sweden and Finland were one nation for more than six hundred years until 1809, when Finland became an autonomous Grand-Duchy of the Russian Empire until independency 1917. Denmark also included Norway until 1814, whereupon Sweden and Norway formed a union until 1905. As the history of the Nordic countries is partly interlinked, so is the Romani policy in the countries (Pulma, 2006, p. 215).
Roma, were generally economically independent living at that time on traditional occupations as coppersmithery, fair grounds, horse trading, fortune telling, music and theatre performances. Several families or groups travelled around the country and regularly returned to the same places. In the summertime many travelled to the northern part of the country, in wintertime to southern Sweden, where they usually stayed until spring (Demetri, Dimiter-Taikon & Rodell Olgaç, 2010). Severe human rights violations against the Roma took place during the past century. These included the refusal for travelling Romani families settling in a municipality for more than a few weeks at a time resulting in the children not attending school on a regular basis and the Romani parents were denied child allowances. Moreover, adults had no voting rights and they could not influence any political decisions to better their socioeconomic and educational situation. Sterilizations and other adverse measures were executed as a tool of social engineering and other diverse measures like children became victims of forced abduction. Between 1914-1954, Swedish borders were closed for Roma that meant that no Roma could seek refuge from Hitler’s persecutions during the Nazi period (Taikon 1963; Hazell, 2000).

The third migration took place from the beginning of the 1960s when different groups of Roma from various countries in Europe, especially Eastern Europe, settled in Sweden (Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination, hereafter: DO, 2004). Also groups of Finnish Kaale Roma moved to Sweden on the introduction of Nordic passport exemption in 1954. A more recent group is composed by Romani asylum seekers from former Yugoslavia, especially Kosovo and Serbia.

Since their arrival in Sweden and in the Nordic countries in the beginning of the 16th century or even earlier, Roma have been subjected to all sorts of coercive measures from the state, the local authorities, and the population in general. For example, Roma were not legible for baptism and neither were they allowed to be married or be buried by the Church. Many cases of Roma being excommunicated from the Church were frequent. During the 17th century Sweden became a more centralized monarchy with tighter social control aiming at more exploitation of the population. The severe vagrant legislation targeted the Roma particularly and had a great impact on their situation (Pulma, 2006, p. 217-219).

A study by Takman (1976) shows that between 1962-65 less than a thousand Roma (not including the Travellers), who already were in the country at that time, lived in camps on the outskirts of Stockholm and other cities under most miserable conditions (ibid., p. 151). Due to increasing urbanization and less demand for the traditional Romani occupations there was a drastic change in the life and occu-

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2 The Equality Ombudsman is a government agency that seeks to combat discrimination on grounds of sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation, or age. The Office of the Equality Ombudsman was formed on 1 January 2009 when the four previous anti-discrimination ombudsmen were merged into a single body. The Equal Opportunities Ombudsman (JämO) dealt with gender-based discrimination, the Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination (DO) focused on discrimination related to ethnicity, religion or other belief, the Disability Ombudsman (HO) was responsible for combating discrimination relating to disability, and the Ombudsman against Discrimination because of Sexual Orientation (HomO) monitored compliance with the rules prohibiting discrimination due to a person’s sexual orientation.
pations, a change of life style from a nomadic to sedentary living, which in many cases led to greater dependence from the social welfare system, that continues to characterize the situation today (Demetri, Dimiter-Taikon & Rodell Olgaç, 2010).

As far as the school situation of the Roma is concerned, the first person to raise this issue was Johan Dimitri Taikon (1879-1950), a Rom from the Kelderash group, who already in the 1930s submitted several proposals to the King of Sweden pointing to the lack of educational offers to the Romani children. One of Taikon’s proposals was to appoint a Romani supervisor to oversee the school situation of the Romani children (Sjögren, 2010, p.190). He also recommended that the children would be placed in a separate boarding school in order to improve attendance to school. The other alternative was to let them attend regular schools wherever they were, often living in temporary conditions (SOU 1956:43, p. 43). The National Agency for Education on the other hand, having limited knowledge about the Romani population, gave no definite policy recommendations on improving the school situation. According to Sjögren (2010) there were however discussions on the possibility to organize separate schools for the Romani children similar to the specific educational organisation for the Sami children from nomadic reindeer-herding families in northern Sweden. It was only after a nation-wide census of Roma in the beginning of the 1940s which showed that only 10–15 percent of them were literate, that measures were taken to improve the education of Romani children (ibid., p. 233). During the 1940s and 1950s for example, a voluntary church organisation, Stiftelsen Svensk Zigenarmission / The Foundation of Swedish Gypsy Mission, organised teaching of the children in summer schools (the so-called Ambulatory Gypsy School) in the camps. The teachers of the summer schools provided reports with information concerning the situation and conditions of the Roma to the authorities. As Sjögren (2010, p. 233) further explains, the teachers adapted teaching methods to Romani life situations that included varying the teaching with regards to period lengths, sizes of groups, and teaching material. Some elements of sewing, household works, and practical activities were also included in the classes that were mixed-age groups. The authorities considered the summer schools as a temporary solution to the schooling for Romani children and in the 1950s they were abolished. The Swedish government official report, Zigenarfrågan, proposed the Roma to be integrated in the regular school, even if they were not registered in the particular municipality (SOU 1956:43, p. 59).

A Romani activist, whose contribution has been of great importance for changing the situation of Roma in Sweden, is Katarina Taikon (1932-1995), who in 1963 published an influential book entitled Zigenerska. Katarina Taikon and her sister Rosa Taikon can be considered to be the first Romani activists, who together with a group of actors and intellectuals championed the Romani cause. Among the activists was Thomas Hammarberg, the previous Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe. Together this group of activists initiated a debate in Sweden concerning the socioeconomic, educational, and housing situation of the Romani population. They appealed to the government and organized demonstrations and meetings to sensitize the government and the society at large about the situation. Katarina Taikon also became well known in Sweden as the author
of children’s books, the most famous being on the life of the Romani girl Katitzi comprising 13 volumes with autobiographical traces documenting Katitzi’s life. The books were not only famous among Swedish children but also read in schools and adapted for a film. One of Katarina Taikon’s books has been translated into several European languages.

2. The present situation of Roma in Sweden

According to Statistics Sweden (SCB), the population of Sweden was nearly 9.5 million people by the end of 2010; in the same year 98,801 persons immigrated. At the end of 2010 almost 19 percent of the Swedish population had a foreign background (Statistics Sweden, 2011, online source www.scb.se 2011-12-10). The number of Roma living in Sweden is estimated to be about 50,000–100,000 people, usually categorised into five major groups by their respective period of arrival in the country (Länsstyrelsen i Stockholms län & Sametinget, 2011, p. 8). Travellers or Travelling Roma, as some call themselves, form the largest group of about 25,000 persons. The Finnish Kaale Roma are estimated to sum up about 3,000 people. Among the other Romani groups a substantial number are from new EU member states and from former Yugoslavia (SOU 2010:55, p. 35). Romani representatives, however, estimate the number of Roma to be higher than the official figures. The Roma in Sweden are sedentary today and live all over the country, with larger groups in the suburban areas of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. Linguistically there is a great variety among the Roma with about 20 different varieties of Romani chib in addition to most European languages (Bijvoet & Frau rud, 2007, p. 15). As well as being linguistically diverse, the Roma are also a religiously diverse group belonging to different religious affiliations such as Catholic, Orthodox, or Muslim. Since the middle of the 1950s many Roma have also come to adhere to the Pentecostal Church (Thurfjell, 2009).

2.1 A national minority

At the beginning of the year 2000, Sweden ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities including the Samis, Tornedalers, Swedish Finns, Roma, and Jews as official national minorities. The Framework Convention states in Article 12:1: that “parties shall, where appropriate, take measures in the fields of education and research to foster knowledge of the culture, history, language and religion of their national minorities and of the majority” (Regeringens proposition, 1998/99:143, p. 126). The ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages further recognises Sami, Finnish, Meänkieli, Romani chib, and Jiddish as official minority languages. This charter explicitly supports and protects these languages “as an important element in Sweden’s cultural heritage and modern society” (SOU 1997:192, p. 21). Finland, Norway and Denmark also have Romani populations. In Finland Roma were recognized as a
national minority in 1997 with a Kaale Roma population approximating about 10000 persons (Romerna i Finland 2004). In Norway the Roma, rom/romafolket/romfolket, and the Travellers, ‘tatere’/reisende/romanifolket, are considered as two separate recognized national minorities since 1999; the Travellers being the largest of the two with approximately 20000 people and the Roma with around 500 people (Bonnevie Lund & Bolme Moen, 2010, p. 199). Denmark on the other hand, has still not recognized the Roma as a national minority, despite critique from the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI, 2006). There are estimated numbers of 5000 Travellers (Hazell 1997) and 2000–4000 Roma (Liégeois, 2007, p. 31) living in Denmark.

2.2 Social situation

The social situation of the Romani minority in Sweden is still characterized by social, economic, and political exclusion and marginalization. A vast majority of the adults are unemployed and underemployed. The group’s life expectancy and living standards are comparatively lower than that of the average Swede. Romani cultural institutions and media are still few and resources are scarce with no secure financial support. The Romani cultural heritage is undocumented and there is no clear overview of what exists and where, making it impossible for the Roma and others to access them. The Romani language is also endangered and at risk of language loss among the children, leading eventually to death of the different varieties of Romani. Participating in political life and formal organizations of the Roma are limited and the Roma as a group do not fully enjoy their democratic and civil rights. While the Roma in Sweden, like other Romani groups in Europe, continue to live in dismal economic and social situation, the Swedish welfare system assures that no-one, including marginalized Romani families, live below the poverty line. Human and minority rights including antidiscriminatory laws and a number of institutions to ensure basic rights are in place. But there is often a discrepancy between policy and practice (SOU 2010:55, p. 35-36).

Already in 2004, the Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination stated that many Roma continue to be a target of extreme racism and antiziganism in Sweden. The discrimination against the Roma is widespread, especially in the labour market, housing sector, and in public spaces such as shops, restaurants etc. (DO, 2004). A recent survey of more than 4500 students in Swedish upper secondary schools conducted by the Living History Forum (www.levandehistoria.se) concerning the attitudes towards the Roma, Muslims, Jews, non-European refugees, and people with homosexual preferences revealed that a larger proportion, i.e. a quarter of all the students, had a more negative attitude towards Roma than to the other groups listed. More general teaching about the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Holocaust did not correlate distinctly with an increase of a positive attitude towards Roma among the studied group (Forum för levande historia, 2010).
3. The educational situation of Roma in Sweden

3.1 The Swedish education system

In Sweden reforms in the 1960s led to an education system where different types of schools are united in one compulsory school. The main responsibility for the education system lies with the municipalities and authorities responsible for both private and independent schools. According to the National Agency for Education, the municipalities are obliged to provide pre-school or family day-care homes for children from one year of age and upwards when their parents are working or studying, unemployed, or on parental leave. Attendance at school is compulsory for children aged 7-16 and free of charge. Compulsory schooling includes comprehensive school, schools for the deaf and hearing-impaired, and for children with learning disabilities. There are special school provisions for the Sami, the indigenous population, and one of the five national minorities in Sweden. Having finished compulsory school all young people in Sweden are entitled to three years of schooling at upper secondary school, free of charge (www.skolverket.se).

The recognition of national minorities in Sweden in 2000 led to certain curricula changes. The curriculum for the compulsory school system (Lpo94) for example stipulates that “the school is responsible for ensuring that all pupils completing compulsory school (…) have knowledge about the national minorities’ cultures, languages, religions and history.” This knowledge is also to be included in the curricula for the pre-school and the non-compulsory school system (Lpf98; Lpf94). New national curricula were introduced in 2011 and the knowledge about the five national minorities is more emphasised, especially in the History, Civics, and Swedish syllabi. In a study on the discrimination of the national minorities in the Swedish education system, the Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination (DO) states that the previous curricula changes have so far had little impact on for example school content and teacher education. The Ombudsman has recommended for the National Agency for Higher Education to investigate in strategies to ensure that all student teachers will develop sufficient knowledge regarding the national minorities’ languages, cultures, and human rights as a part of their teacher education (DO, 2008, p. 42). Additionally, already in 2005 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) recommends in its third report about Sweden “that the Swedish authorities ensure that all schools educate their pupils regarding the culture, language, religion and history of national minorities” (ECRI, 2005, p. 10). Concerning Roma and Travellers, ECRI further notes “that the authorities and society in general, are reported to have limited knowledge of Romani peoples, their contemporary situation and the reasons for this” (ibid., p. 25). According to a Swedish government report from the Constitution Committee (KU) following the implementation of the Framework Convention and the European Charter there are severe discrepancies between policy and practice (KU 2005). This situation is still very much the same.

The right to receive mother tongue education was introduced in Sweden in 1977 (Hyltenstam, 1996, p. 29). Today mother tongue education is organized by
the municipality if there are at least five pupils speaking the same mother tongue and if there is a mother tongue teacher available. As for the national minorities it requires the presence of one pupil for mother tongue class to be organized. The mother tongue classes are often offered 1-2 hours once a week and usually placed after the regular time table. While the Romani children have the extended right to mother tongue education in Romani or a second or even a third mother tongue in certain cases, the participation has been minimal. In 2006 for example, the reported number of students entitled to education in Romani chib in the variety of Kalé and Lovari/Kelderash was 1,281 students (Skolverket, 2007, p. 49-50). Statistics from the National Agency for Education show that only 25% of the Romani pupils participate in mother tongue classes as compared to 63% of the Sami (Skolverket, 2005, p. 38). Statistics about the Roma or any other minority groups as far as participation in mother tongue classes is limited and whatever statistics is available do not give the specifics of all pupils entitled to the right to this education. The figure is probably much higher also because some of the Romani pupils or their parents tell the school that they come from Poland, for example, and request mother tongue classes only in Polish. Through hiding the Romani identity of their children, the parents try to protect their children from anticipated ethnic discrimination (DO, 2008, p. 36). This under-communication is compounded by the fact that the schools still only have few qualified Romani teachers, and that teachers may speak another variety of Romani than the pupils. The under-communication is limiting the group’s possibilities of preserving and developing their own language and culture. The consequences are a language replacement process and language loss among Romani children (cf. Bijvoet & Fraurud, 2007). According to the Ombudsman against Discrimination this minimal participation in mother tongue classes can be traced back to the structural discrimination of the Roma and with the consequences that Romani parents do not always inform the school about their children being Roma and speaking Romani chib (DO, 2008). Another explanation could be that Romani parents are not always informed by the school about the right of their children to receive mother tongue education and the limited number of Romani teachers with a formal teacher education is also contributing to low participation in mother tongue classes.

While the five national minorities are provided for in the policy documents today, the actual implementation in practice i.e., the inclusion of the Romani language, history and culture is still minimal in Swedish schools, school books, and teacher education programs, even after the curriculum changes (Skolverket, 2005, 2007; DO, 2008; SOU 2010:55; Lindgren, 2011). However, Romani organisations are in various ways trying to turn around this discrepancy between policy and practice.

An example of the contribution made by Romani organisations is found in an evaluation report of 27 Romani projects documenting activities for Romani children and youth during 1996-2009. The results of this evaluation show diverse activities concerning issues related to for example school and education and promotion of cultural and linguistic revitalisation among the children and youth. A number of these activities involved the children, youth and the project leaders who
actively participated in sensitising the mainstream society and its authorities about Romani history, culture and traditions. The findings from this report also indicate that by leading and being actively involved in these projects, the participants gained not only leadership skills but also skills that enable them to handle the formal routines of non-governmental organisations that are an important asset, or the cultural capital, in formal contexts in Sweden (Rodell Olgaç, 2009).

The initiative for change of attitude about the Roma is demonstrated in a study by this author, in an intervention research with 29 student teachers in a regular course in their teacher education program. The intervention involved two questionnaires concerning the students’ knowledge about the Romani history, culture and contemporary social situation instituted before and after two Romani teachers who lectured on Romani history, language and culture. The participants in the course also read an autobiography of a Romani writer Hans Caldaras (2002). The second questionnaire aimed at finding out what changes in attitude occurred between the first and the second questionnaire. The results show that the participants who initially had very limited knowledge about the Roma or expressed prejudiced views in the first questionnaire showed considerable change of attitude in their responses in the second questionnaire. Although the study was limited in scope, it had positive impact on the students. The two aspects that most impacted on the participants regarding the situation of the Roma were firstly Romani history and the sufferings of Roma historically, and secondly, the heterogeneity and diversity of the Roma, dispelling the conception that the Roma is a homogeneous group. At the end of the course many participants expressed their desire to continue working for an increased inclusion of Romani pupils and other minorities in educational contexts (Rodell Olgaç, 2011).

3.2 Roma between national self-awareness and the democratic credo

Although the Swedish educational system on policy level is inclusive and lucrative, in practice it does not favour the Roma and there is obviously a discrepancy between the policy documents and what happens in reality in the schools. When discussing the educational situation of Roma in Sweden, it is necessary to take into account that in Swedish educational policy there have been two dominant and contradictory (exclusivist and inclusivist) discourses relating to minority and migrant children that Municio (1993) has labelled as ‘national self-awareness’ and ‘the democratic credo’. The discourse of ‘national self-awareness’ refers to the highly-pervasive notion of Sweden as a monolingual and mono-cultural nation-state, contrasting directly with the historical experience of Sweden as a multi-ethnic nation-state. The ideology of national self-awareness has been the hegemonic and normative discourse throughout the early 20th century and remains an exclusivist tendency in contemporary society for the situation of minority and migrant communities (cf. Catomeris, 2004, Hagerman, 2006). Opposed to this the discourse of the ‘democratic credo’ (Municio, 1993) is inclusivist and based on the principles of inalienable, individual, equal human rights, that gradually devel-
oped after 1945 and clearly in tension with the notion of ‘national self-awareness’. Therefore, as Municio (2001, p. 229) argues, it is important “to dismantle the official myth of Sweden as an originally homogeneous country, and therefore different from other European countries”. Furthermore Municio points out that a prerequisite for upholding this myth has been the repression of the autochthonous language minorities, i.e. the Sami population, Swedish Finns, Tornedalers, Jews, and Roma. The discourse of national self-awareness has thus excluded Roma and other national minorities in Sweden from in practice enjoying full citizenship in the Swedish society.

The two different discourses above have also to some extent influenced academic research on Roma in Sweden and this has had an impact on attitudes towards Roma, as well as state interventions concerning Roma. Many Swedish studies on Roma have been “motivated by ‘social engineering’ rather than science, which makes it difficult to draw a boundary between scientific and non-scientific works” (Palosuo, 2009, p. 82). Reports and studies about the Roma have often been initiated by the state and local authorities. Today there is still little research done in Sweden on the historical and contemporary situation of the Romani population. Proposals for future research have been formulated by Palosuo in cooperation with a Romani expert panel and address the questions concerning antiziganism, discrimination and traumatisation. While education is not specifically mentioned in this report, the proposals raise questions about language, Romani culture and identity (ibid., p. 82). Finally, it is emphasized that Roma should be part of establishing the frames and objectives of research concerning them.

3.3 Educational research on Roma

Academic research on Roma also in the field of education has been limited, except for a period during the 1960s and the 1970s. A change occurred in the 1960s when the Romani socioeconomic and educational situation was highlighted in the media. This led to an increased interest in Romani issues and to a number of research reports and theses, especially at the Institute of Education at Stockholm University (See for example Trankell & Trankell, 1968; Gustafsson, 1971; Ödman, 1975). Since that time there has not been any Swedish doctoral thesis in Education concerning the educational situation of the Roma until 2006 (Rodell Olgaç, 2006). The study identifies three periods concerning the relationship between the Roma and the mainstream school system; the first covers the period from the middle of the 20th century until the 1970s, when the Roma were formally allowed into schools. This period is according to the study characterised by the Romani struggle for the right to education. The second period, between 1970s until year 2000 and the recognition of Roma as a national minority, is a period when the expectations of Swedish society were that school attendance would increase as a consequence and the children would quickly adapt to the schools and their norms. The expectations never materialised and the children’s absenteeism from school remained high and they never really felt at home in these schools. One
of the explanations to this can be the ideological and structural power relations in schools and how the Roma themselves understood the role of the school as an instrument for furthering the values and norms of mainstream society. According to the same study, this second period was a period of uncertainty for many Romani parents, who perceived school as a threat and an institution that contributed to their cultural loss. The schools in turn had gradually left the responsibility for educating the Romani children to the families, thus abdicating their role as providers of academic development (cf. Lareau, 2000, 2003). Another aspect is the systematic discrimination that the Romani children experienced in school. The school often took a deficit perspective in relation to the Romani families and, rather than taking responsibility for the education of the Romani children, they blamed the failures on the Romani group and its culture. The period was still characterized by an essentialist view of culture, especially Romani culture (cf. Mayall, 2004), where culture was used to explain the failure of schools. Concerning the third and final period, 2000-2005, the study indicates that since the recognition of the Roma as a national minority in 2000, there has however been a remobilisation and revitalization by the Roma and their demand for more inclusion in education. In contrast, the response from mainstream society has not changed much, except for an increased recognition of the Roma as a historical minority group. Thus, there is strong indication that Municio’s (1993) above mentioned discourse of national self-awareness continues to be hegemonic and dominant also in relation to Roma, at the same time challenged by the inclusive discourse of democratic credo (Rodell Olgaç, 2006).

A more recent report by Söderman & Ström (2008) on the educational situation of Roma in the city of Malmö in southern Sweden illustrates the existing diversity of Romani groups with approximately 6000–7000 Roma from at least six different groups; Lovara, Kelderash, Romungri, Arli, Gurbet, and Kalé, who are from nine different nationalities, e.g. Swedish Roma, Hungarian, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Rumanian, Ukrainian, and from former Yugoslavia and other Balkan countries, living in the city. In addition to these figures, the report further notes that there are also Roma without residence permit mainly from Romania in Malmö. This group and the approximately 2000–3000 Travellers in the city are not included in the report. The report indicates that about half of the 1000 Romani children within the ages of 7–15 years do not attend school. It further states that one of the reasons to the absenteeism is that the municipality has no information about the families as they move often and do not notify the schools. For the age group between 16–25 years only 50 out of 1000 young Roma attend upper secondary school (ibid., pp. 3-5). The picture portrayed by this report is that the Roma is heterogeneous and the differences between the groups can be huge. While the report obviously confirms the low participation of the Romani children and youth in Swedish public schools, the report confirms that there is hardly any mother tongue education provided in the city of Malmö and few mother tongue teachers employed. There is also evidence from informal communication with some of the Roma showing that there is an increased interest in the debate by the Roma themselves concerning these issues. Yet another example is reported in a study by Liedholm & Lind-
berg (2010) in Malmö based on 20 interviews with a very heterogeneous group of Roma and non-Roma carried out in seven schools. The study focused on the school situation of Romani children and specifically on measures to improve their educational performance. The results of the study demonstrates heterogeneity and variations in terms of academic achievement among the Romani children in that there are schools where the Romani children are excelling, while others have experiencing difficulties resulting in, for example, high absenteeism. The contributing factors for differences between the schools are the presence of the Romani staff as well as more teacher concentration. Mutual respect is also mentioned as an important factor. The study concludes by suggesting some important factors to improve the educational situation that includes incorporating knowledge about the history, culture and contemporary situation of the Roma in the school activities and also raising awareness among the teachers. The implications of the studied results indicate that there is need for more understanding of the educational situation of the Romani children involving an awareness of the historical background of the minority. One other issue emphasized by the Romani respondents in the study is the importance of recruiting Romani staff with formal qualifications in the schools. At the time of the study there were only three Romani teachers in the city and this is indeed limited and possibilities in using and developing the Romani language are dismal.

4. The Roma cultural class – an example of good practice

In what follows, the focus will be on a unique example of Romani education in Sweden, the “Roma Culture Class”, a multilingual group with pupils speaking different varieties of Romani in the southern suburbs of Stockholm. The class is taught by three Romani teachers who since 2010 have formal teacher training and university diplomas in Education. The choice of this example is grounded in the fact that, besides a Romani pre-school opened in Malmö in 2006, it is the only Romani class taught by Romani teachers in Sweden, and that the class has been in existence for more than fifteen years. It started in the beginning of the 1990s as a joint initiative of the current Romani teachers, the Roma community, mainly Kelderash and Lovara, and the local school aiming at the collaboration of the families, their children and the school. The latter had a number of Romani pupils whose families had settled in the area after World War II before the families were allowed into settled housing in the 1960s. Thus several generations of families have lived in the area and can trace their history back there. Unlike many other schools, this school has a long history of contact with Romani families. The Roma Culture Class was set up because it was perceived by the Romani teachers as more inclusive and a way to prevent the absenteeism especially among the older Romani pupils at the school. The Roma Culture Class started by the two of the current three teachers whose initiative and engagement is one of the reasons why the class has been continuing to function since the start. While using the national curriculum, the teachers draw from the Romani family learning styles including
the use of mother tongue and combining children from mixed-age groups facilitating cross-generational learning and socialisation. The children in this class are between 5–16 years of age; some of them also with special needs. Many of the older pupils have come from other schools, where they experienced social isolation, discrimination and educational failure; many of them arrive in the beginning of their teens. In the last few years also an increased number of pre-school children have joined the class. Currently there are about 30 pupils in the class.

Much of the work in class has mixed-age group activities as a starting point and builds on common family learning patterns such as older pupils acting as role models and mentors for the younger. Another important aspect for the work in the class is the inclusion of Romani parents, who are perceived as a learning resource. Together they exercise for example language related activities, use documentations, pictures and photos related to Romani history, culture and language. The documents include archive pictures of Romani families of the last century portraying ancestors or well-known Romani scholars who visited the class. Besides these historical artefacts also fairy tales and other children’s literature, including Romani proverbs are used. Lunch is cooked in the kitchen connected to the classrooms and conversations during lunch typically include issues on Romani culture, traditions, food and further issues that feed into this family like learning patterns. In this setting, the teachers place their cultural and linguistic revitalization; they aim at a process where Romani pupils bring words, concepts and expressions home from school and discuss them with their parents and other family members. The teachers have co-operated with the National Agency for Education in developing and piloting the European Framework Curriculum for Romani and Romaniphe. They have also introduced new ways of working with science inspired by science centre pedagogy and linking traditional Romani oral knowledge with school subjects, including work on environmental preservation. For example the traditional Romani wedding is used for calculations of costs in Mathematics and the processes in the traditional coppersmithery work and tinning are linked to Chemistry.

Many of the parents have completed merely a few years of schooling so the participation also indirectly involves the parents own knowledge development. The ethos of this class is based on this close co-operation between the parents and the school. Pictures and photos in the classroom play an important role in the contact with the parents. Through them the parents can follow the work in the class more easily and be able to participate in the activities. Through the discussions that the children bring to the homes and vice versa, they also become more aware of Romani history, culture and language, which for so long has been invisible in the Swedish school contexts and marginalised in the mainstream society.

The internet is another area in which Romani parents are involved. Parents and teachers have noticed that the old, traditional ways of memorizing knowledge is being lost among the younger. Thus, other modes of literacy are being prioritized. While many families may not have books at home, children come in contact with literacy by other sources and the personal computer plays an important role in this respect. Often also parents themselves spontaneously learn to work with the computers and via the world wide web can keep in contact with relatives and keep
informed about the situation of the Romani minorities worldwide. The class has a website (www.romakulturklass.com) providing information concerning Roma, Romani history, traditions and language. It keeps an update about the work done in the class and acts as a source of information for other Roma and non-Roma nationally and internationally. Although there has not been a study specifically on academic achievement of the class, considering the multi-age and the social diversity characterizing this class, the teachers see a general tendency in some formal academic achievement and also a reduction in absenteeism. Furthermore, the relationship with the parents and the confidence shown by the parents in the teachers and consequently the school has improved the home-school alliance. An interesting aspect of the work done by the teachers is the continued contact with former pupils, especially the drop-outs whom did not complete their secondary school or upper secondary school. These former pupils, some of who have been married and have had children, return to the class for visits and discussions with the teachers on the possibilities of continuing their formal schooling and what career paths to chose after completion. The former pupils are actively involved in the social activities in the class (Rodell Olgaç, Demetri & Dimiter-Taikon, 2007, 2010).

5. Concluding remarks and prospects

As one consequence of the previously mentioned ratifications of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the Swedish Delegation for Roma Issues was appointed by the government in January 2007. The Delegation had a temporary mandate in order to investigate the situation for the Romani minority in Sweden and propose reforms to improve the situation of the Roma on the basis of Sweden’s international commitments to protect and promote human rights. The Delegation completed its work, when the Swedish government official report, Roma rätt – en strategi för romer i Sverige, ‘Romani rights – a strategy for Roma in Sweden’, (SOU 2010:55) was presented at the end of July 2010. In the report the Delegation makes proposals for how the work to improve the living conditions of the Roma should be conducted. The report states that the present situation for the Romani minority “is unacceptable to a modern democracy and a welfare state that prides itself of promoting human rights and minority rights” (ibid., p. 37). The Delegation proposes a political, financial and organisational push – a Swedish Roma Strategy – that according to the proposal should be implemented and concluded in 20 years. This strategy has three over-arching goals: firstly, to close the welfare divides between Roma and mainstream society, secondly, to reduce the power deficit of Roma and finally, to bridge the confidence gap and build Roma trust in state institutions and mainstream society. Concerning education the Delegation states a number of future goals. Among them that all Romani children shall complete compulsory schooling and adult Romani illiteracy shall be abolished. The Delegation also proposes reforms such as state subsidies for primary education allowing for teacher assistants and other support targeted for Romani children.
Another proposal concerns financial support for adult Romani students and that student loans for adult compulsory schooling should be written off for Roma. The Delegation has also proposed the Schools Inspectorate to investigate and give recommendations regarding the improvement of mother tongue in Romani including supplying more teaching materials. Thus, fulfilling the educational goals as stipulated in the curriculum (SOU 2010: 55, pp. 303-304).

In concluding, almost eighty years have passed since Johan Dimitri Taikon wrote to the King of Sweden to raise the issues of Romani education, and almost fifty years have elapsed since Katarina Taikon and other activists demonstrated for the right to education for Roma in Sweden. While there have been positive changes regarding the rights of the Roma to education at the policy level though, that includes the recognition of Roma as one of the national minorities in the country, there is still a discrepancy between policy and practice. The goals put forward by the Delegation for Roma Issues for example and specifically in their suggestion for a National Strategy for improving the situation are yet to be fulfilled. The issues that the Romani activists raised almost fifty years ago are still the same issues plaguing the Romani community and the school children.

While the studies cited in the previous sections show potential for change in the attitude of the majority and initiative by Roma themselves in turning around and improving the situation of their children, there is much work to be done in the educational field. The Roma demand for more inclusion, especially in education, as they view education as a key for their children’s future. For this to come true it remains for the mainstream society to meet the Roma halfway and on equal terms, because as Tyler argues: “The process of inclusion cannot be rushed and must depend on negotiated inclusion, in that both the group to be included, and the including society, can agree a set of terms and conditions for inclusion without any coercion by the includers” (Tyler, 2005, p. 6).

References


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