

# Cultural Mismatch in Roma Parents' Perceptions: The Role of Culture, Language, and Traditional Roma Values in Schools

Veselina Lambrev

University of Hawai'i at Manoa

*This article draws on data from a two-year qualitative study exploring the factors contributing to Roma students' disparate outcomes in Bulgaria. I utilize ethnographic observations, oral history, and in-depth interviews with twenty Roma parents to gain understanding of Roma children's "cultural capital" and relation to formal schools. The article builds on theoretical orientations, generated primarily in the U.S., that emphasize strengths and the need for culturally relevant pedagogy, and explores the possibility to extend these to the case of Roma communities in Europe. The findings indicate that the traditional education of Roma children differs considerably from the mainstream values emphasized in Bulgarian schools. These include the practice of community-based, informal education, child independence, and early participation in adult life, which have the potential to make the transition from home to school problematic. I argue that if educational equity is the goal, policies and practices must shift their current focus from promoting a monocultural Bulgarian curriculum and pedagogical approaches to meaningful incorporation of culturally relevant content and creating educational environments conducive to Roma students' learning.*

*Cet article se fonde sur des données provenant d'une étude qualitative qui a duré deux ans et qui a porté sur les facteurs qui contribuent aux résultats divergents des étudiants roms en Bulgarie. Mes données reposent sur des observations ethnographiques, l'histoire orale et des entrevues détaillées auprès de vingt parents roms et ce, pour mieux comprendre le « capital culturel » des enfants roms et leur relation aux écoles formelles. L'article s'appuie sur des orientations théoriques issues surtout de milieux américains et qui soulignent l'importance des bienfaits d'une pédagogie pertinente sur le plan culturel, fait valoir le besoin d'une telle approche et explore la possibilité d'appliquer ces orientations au cas des communautés roms en Europe. Les résultats indiquent que l'éducation traditionnelle des enfants roms diffère considérablement des valeurs communément soulignées dans les écoles bulgares; parmi les éléments divergents, notons la pratique d'une éducation informelle et communautaire, l'autonomie des enfants et la participation précoce à la vie adulte – facteurs qui ont le potentiel de rendre difficile la transition de la maison à l'école. J'affirme que si l'objectif est l'équité en matière d'éducation, les politiques et les pratiques doivent se détourner de la promotion d'un curriculum et d'approches pédagogiques homogènes bulgares vers une intégration significative de contenu culturel pertinent et la création de milieux pédagogiques propices à l'apprentissage par les étudiants roms.*

In the post-socialist Central and Southeast European countries, the underperformance of Roma students in K-12 education is a source of concern among Roma parents and communities, as well as educators and non-governmental organizations (NGO) promoting human rights. Despite growing international initiatives targeting the marginalization of this group (i.e. the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 and the European Union [EU] Strategy of Roma Inclusion, among others), in Bulgaria, the differences between literacy levels and school completion outcomes between Roma and non-Roma have persisted.

According to the last National Census (NSI, 2011), the Bulgarian citizens who self-identified as Roma are about five percent, making them the second largest minority group after the ethnic Turks. However, unofficial estimates show that the number of Roma in Bulgaria ranges from 800,000 to one million (about 9 percent) (Council of Europe, 2010). The vast majority of this group live in poverty—often in segregated “ghetto”-like neighborhoods at the outskirts of cities or in remote rural areas. Although discrimination and ethnic school segregation have been outlawed (National Parliament, 2003), the compliance of Bulgaria to anti-discrimination policy during its EU pre-accession prior to 2007 has not improved the historical exclusion of Roma from both the education and economic systems. Similarly to other countries in the region that have strived for political and economic inclusion into the EU, the post-socialist Bulgarian governments were required to implement inclusion policy. However, while local political actors have “borrowed” the EU concepts of “minority inclusion” and “equal education rights” (Silova, 2002), the historical anti-gypsism in the region has further marginalized the Roma (Marushiakova & Popov, 2005). A recent study exploring the intergenerational Roma poverty in 11 EU Member states showed that in 2012 over 44 percent of the surveyed Roma in Bulgaria reported that at least one person in the household went to bed hungry in the previous month; 62 percent shared a sense of economic instability (World Bank, 2013). With more than 30 percent younger than 15-years-old (the number is double compared to the general population), Roma represent a considerable share of young people entering the Bulgarian labor force (World Bank, 2013).

As part of the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015—a major political initiative of European governments to eliminate discrimination and close the gap between Roma and the majority society—the Bulgarian governments have indicated educational integration and advancement as priorities. However, in relation to educational outcomes, most indicators show that Roma children are still significantly behind their *gadje*<sup>1</sup> peers, and their relationship with the formal school system has remained vague and conflicting (Marushiakova & Popov, 2013; REF, 2015). Among all ethnic groups, Roma have maintained the highest level of illiteracy and early school leaving, and Bulgarian schools are the highest socially stratified system among all EU countries (World Bank, 2013). The existence of second-class education provision for Roma students and school segregation has remained unquestioned with the most recent national document addressing exclusion. The *National Roma Integration Strategy* (NRIS) 2010 indicates a setback: ethnic school desegregation, which was a focus of inclusion policy prior to EU accession, is replaced by measures supporting the education of Roma students in the segregated schools.

A series of neo-liberal reforms, including the introduction of delegated school budgets in the 2007-2008 educational reform, further decreased the opportunities of Roma to receive equitable education provision (Amalipe, 2010). Because the new budget system introduced a unified standard for expenditure for allowance per student, many small schools in rural towns closed down leaving a number of Roma children who already lived in poverty out of school. In

addition, the delegated budgets reform led to a significant reduction of elective classes in elementary and middle school curriculum (i.e. “Folklore of the Ethnos—Roma folklore” and “Mother Romani Tongue”) despite the interest in intercultural education provision on behalf of families (Amalipe, 2010). Several studies reported that the new Education Laws in the last decade failed to bring a radical change in fostering inclusive education, but rather, protected the status quo (Amalipe, 2010; Miskovic, 2013). Reflecting on the continued monoculturalism of the Bulgarian schools, Amalipe (2010) pointed out: “It seems that the [National] Programme pays no attention to the ethnical and cultural peculiarities of the children and pupils, or that these peculiarities are not considered to be important for the Bulgarian education” (p. 47).

To address Roma students’ disadvantage in education, this article argues for a better understanding of the impact of existent disparities between the culture of Roma children and the dominant cultural values emphasized in mainstream schools. For the purpose of this article, I focus on traditional values (i.e. cultural values, beliefs, and practices) held by Roma families who participated in the study to argue for culturally relevant pedagogies that have the potential to close the gap between school and home cultures and to elevate Roma people’s educational outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

This study builds on theoretical orientations, generated primarily in the U.S., that consider “cultural mismatch” and emphasize strengths as well as the need for culturally responsive education. The research questions that guided this study are: 1) how do Bulgarian Roma parents in three urban communities describe the traditional Roma cultural values, and 2) how do parents perceive the implications of cultural mismatch on the way their children approach formal education and learn? The main purpose of this study is to gain knowledge about the traditional Roma cultural values, beliefs, and practices as a way of informing teachers and school authorities about culturally relevant approaches and content they can utilize in school and thus make the educational experiences of Roma students more meaningful, which in turn can lead to better educational outcomes for them.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Cultural Capital, Cultural Mismatch, and Minority Achievement: Theoretical Approaches**

The cultural mismatch theory is based on the idea that minority students who are raised in different cultural settings may approach education and learning in a way that conflicts with the predominantly Western culture of mainstream schools. Developed mainly in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, this orientation, that has informed empirical studies in the U.S. since 1960s (Collins, 2012; Heath, 1983; Poveda & Martin, 2004), highlights the importance for policy makers, schools, and teachers to be aware of the different cultural knowledge that learners from underrepresented populations bring to school. Bourdieu (1986) refers to “cultural capital” to argue that cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills are passed from one generation to the next, having an important role in children’s school experience. He suggests that if the “cultural capital” of students matches the school’s values, students would profit from formal education and are more likely to succeed academically.

Many studies in the U.S. have addressed the discrepancies between the cultural knowledge acquired at home and the culture of U.S. schools in relation to various minority groups. These studies (e.g. Bernstein, 1971; Foley, 1991; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Heat, 1983) find that

elements, such as customs, traditions, communicative patterns, as well as the socio-cultural rules that influence these patterns have a significant effect on minority students' school experiences. Mismatching cultural patterns often creates misunderstanding in the learning-teaching process because cultural values similarly impact dominant educators' views, interaction styles, and expectations of their students (Foley, 1991). The proponents of the theory argue that the mismatch must be addressed because it can result in negative learning experiences for minority children whose cultural background and learning style are juxtaposed to the values and norms of mainstream teachers (Heat, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The theory has taken several directions in examining the specific areas of cultural conflict created in mainstream schools. Attention has been paid to discontinuities in communication patterns (Gay, 2000; Heath, 1983) and language differences (Gonzalez et al., 2005), and ways for teachers to help overcome cultural conflict in the classroom by becoming better "cultural transmitters" in educating "other people's children" (Delpit, 1995). Since the 1980s anthropologists have examined ways for U.S. schools to better match the cultures of minority students, arguing for creating more culturally sensitive learning environments. For instance, Au and Jordan (1981) describe a reading program in the Hawaiian Kamehameha School that incorporates *talk-story*, a language interaction style common among the Hawaiian people. The study reports that the practice of *cultural appropriate pedagogy* improves the reading achievement of native Hawaiians on standardized tests. Furthermore, Mohatt and Erickson (1982) suggest that culturally responsive instructional strategy can be seen as a beginning step "to the improvement of minority children's school achievement and to the improvement of the everyday school life for such children and their teachers" (p. 170) and Ladson-Billings (1995) observes that successful educators of African American students hold high expectations of all their students—a practice that yields high academic achievement. More recently, Phuong-Mai, Terlouw, Pilot, and Elliott (2009) apply culturally appropriate cooperative learning as opposed to traditionally Western learning practice in an Asian context to argue that the application of mainstream pedagogies in non-mainstream cultures should be adjusted by attending to the values of the host culture. Benefits of culturally familiar pedagogical practices have also been documented in family literacy programs in culturally diverse communities in Canada (Friedrich, Anderson, & Morrison, 2014).

### **Cultural Mismatch and Minority Achievement: The Roma Context**

Despite being part of European societies for more than a millennium, Roma groups' cultures have rarely been represented in mainstream education (Hancock, 2002; Miskovic, 2013; Stewart, 1989). In a study on child-directed speech in a Hungarian Roma community, for instance, Reger and Gleason (1991) focus on language socialization and ethnography of communication, arguing that these patterns are in sharp contrast with the official language of mainstream schools. The authors observe that Roma children are introduced from an early age to "lengthy and dramatic stories [that are related to] the child's future life [with] details of his or her eventual love life and marriage, future occupation, and conflicts that may arise" (pp. 606-607). These special features of child-directed speech are influenced by the oral Roma culture, rooted in folklore stories and songs. "Test-questions" related to family members, family possessions, or upcoming community events are reported as a way of transmitting cultural knowledge, ensuring attachment to collective identity, and preparing children for future adult life. Even though some of the patterns could be advantageous to Roma students (such as the

ability to dialogue and exchange information), children might not use them in a foreign school environment with unknown classroom interaction style. Reger and Gleason (1991) argue that the communication patterns that Roma children use at home before they enter mainstream education are actually unknown for researchers, policy makers, and educators, representing one of the main causes for students' academic failure.

Several studies analyze the cultural traditions in which Roma children are raised arguing that Roma customs, values, and interaction styles are in contrast with those in the mainstream cultures. Smith (1997) focuses on the priority of family over individual life among some Roma societies and argues that Roma children "are encouraged to show initiative and independence at an early age" (p. 243). Levinson and Sparkes (2004) add observations about the vast difference between the free movement of children in the "Gypsy" neighborhoods and the structural social system of schools. Considering the potential consequences of cultural mismatch, the study concludes that: "At the very least, the capital [Roma children] bring to the school environment is not recognized and is of limited use there" (Levinson & Sparkes, 2004, p. 769).

In the Bulgarian context, several scholars highlight the inequality of education provision and the existence of cultural incongruence in formal schools. Tomova (2013) observes that Roma are the only ethnic group whose education status deteriorated after the political shift in 1990. Opportunities for equitable education and upward mobility have become significantly restricted in the post-socialist era making Roma the most marginalized group. The rise of preschool and kindergarten fees after 1990 has left a number of economically struggling Roma children without the opportunity to receive early childhood education. For many years, four-fifths of the Roma children in the country have not attended preschool due to financial hardship (Marushiakova & Popov, 2013; Tomova, 2013). Furthermore, the privatization of buildings where preschools are located leads to the closure of a number of preschools, especially in the larger cities, where enrollment depends on personal contacts and, often, ethnic belonging—a fact that further exacerbates the social exclusion of Roma groups (Tomova, 2013). As a result, the majority of Roma first-graders enter schools already disadvantaged: with a limited knowledge of the official Bulgarian language and not prepared for the academic standards set by schools. Other financial cuts in the post-socialist period, such as limited resources for elective classes, negatively impact Roma minority children who could no longer take classes in their mother tongue and culture. The exclusion of knowledge about Roma culture and language from the mainstream curriculum prompts Kyuchukov (2000), a prominent Roma scholar and human rights advocate, to conclude that schools in Bulgaria do not value the bilingualism of Roma children but rather, see it "as a handicap" (p. 273). Kyuchukov's (1999) comparative analysis of the interaction between teachers and ethnic Bulgarian students and teachers and Roma in Bulgarian classrooms, demonstrates that "no cultural differentiation or differential treatment of the children [is observed] in order to address the fact that some of the children have different levels of language knowledge" (p. 159). More recently, Kyuchukov (2013) argues that since Roma cultural background is neglected by schools, teachers often see their bilingual students as deficient, and communication problems are often solved by placing Roma children in the back of the classroom or sending them to school "for retarded or physically challenged children" (p. 275). To mitigate the negative effects of cultural mismatch, Kyuchukov argues that Roma students must learn their mother tongue in schools in a systematic way. Another strategy proposed is the inclusion of Roma teachers and school mediators "where the number of Roma population is high" (p. xii).

The existent studies exploring minority cultural traditions in their relation to formal

education in different contexts emphasize the idea that the absence of knowledge about the socio-cultural competencies of non-dominant students presents a problem for the academic performance of these children. Drawing from the theoretical orientations that they emphasize, this article makes explicit that if “cultural capital” is fundamental for equitable learning and school completion, identifying and understanding Roma people’s cultural foundations can provide insights about the learning of Roma in contemporary classrooms. Focusing on the parents’ perspectives, this study maps out the special features of the traditional Roma education to argue that policy attention to diversity can bring relevant and just education for Roma children.

### Research Sites, Data Collection, and Analysis

The findings reported in this article come from a larger two-year longitudinal study of the educational opportunities and outcomes of Roma students in three Bulgarian towns. The research involved twenty Roma parents across three communities situated in Eastern and Southeast Bulgaria. The main criterion for the selection of sites was the large Roma populations who lived there. In Town 1, Roma constitute about 9 percent of the total population, in Town 2—about 12 percent, and in Town 3 the percent of Roma groups is as high as 15 percent (data retrieved from the last National Census conducted in 2011).

The three communities have interesting similarities and differences in terms of demographics, language, religion, and extent of marginalization. Roma community in Town 1 accommodates members from the *Horahane* (Turkish Roma) and *Das(i)kane* (Christian Roma) ethnic groups. Additionally, its Roma residents subdivide themselves in three smaller ethnic subgroups: *Turkish Gypsies*, various kin of *Christian Gypsies*, and *Halimata*<sup>2</sup> (speaking dialects of Romani). While Turkish Gypsies held a slightly higher socio-economic status, Halimata were the poorest and most marginalized group—as former residents of a public housing project that was demolished after a mayor’s order in 2010, a thousand families of this group lost their homes. During my last visit in 2014, a large number of Halimata still lived there in tents or self-constructed huts made of metal scrap, wood, or cardboard.

While community 1 is located at the end of town but still connected to it, the Roma community in Town 2 is isolated with solid concrete walls surrounding it on every side. I was told by town officials that the walls were built in the 1990s to prevent Roma from crossing the nearby train tracks on their way to town, but my Roma participants were certain that the walls’ purpose was to separate their neighborhood from the Bulgarian parts of town. The quarter can be entered through two ways—either through the main gate or from an underpass, which connects the community to town. Parents explained that children had to go through the underpass on their way to school and back, and this could be a dangerous experience especially in the dark evening hours when they returned from second shift. Furthermore, the quarter is divided into two main areas—while the bigger one is a home to the *Bulgarian*, *Turkish*, and *Musician Gypsies*, a small part of it is further isolated and reserved for the *Naked Gypsies* reflecting their long-term segregation and marginalization among the rest of the Roma communities.

Unlike Towns 1 and 2, the Roma neighborhood in Town 3 is situated close to the city center and in close proximity of main boulevards and shopping centers. Like the first two communities, this one accommodates Roma from the two biggest groups: *Turkish Roma* (called in this region *millet*) and *Bulgarian Gypsies*, and a small group called *Zagundzhii*. During my stay, the

majority of the millet that I met did not speak the Romani language, preferred the name *Cigani* (Gypsies), and attested that the term “Roma” was alien for them. The second largest group, *Bulgarian Gypsies*, has a slightly higher economic status, is Orthodox Christian, and mostly converses in Bulgarian. I met a smaller part of them who could speak Romani but the majority of them only spoke Bulgarian. The third one, *Zagundzhii*, is comprised of new settlers from Northeast Bulgarian villages, who came to town in search of better options. Their mother tongue is Romani and participants referred to themselves as Roma. They are the poorest and most marginalized community in Town 3: in their part of the neighborhood, there is no running water, sewage, or electricity, and huts are made of cardboard and metal scrap.

This study was qualitative; data were drawn from community observations, oral history, and in-depth interviews. Consistent with the research purpose, interviews with parents focused on the values emphasized in Roma culture and the possible implications of cultural discontinuity on the learning of Roma children. As a non-Roma person, my access was facilitated by local teachers, community leaders, and NGO staff. Interview data were transcribed and translated in English by me. These data were initially coded deductively, and after reading through it to develop initial codes, I performed an inductive analysis to identify descriptive concepts (Gibbs, 2009; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). To triangulate methods, observation data were similarly coded and analyzed. At the end of the process, “member checks” were performed to share my analysis with participants and people of respect in the communities.

## Findings

The major theme across parents’ interviews related to the differences between some of the values and practices emphasized in Roma culture and the mainstream values promoted in Bulgarian schools. First, parents highlighted the central role of family and community in children’s upbringing and the higher value of collectivism in Romani societies. Among the traditional Roma cultural patterns the respondents indicated the practice of early childhood independence, storytelling and dialogical nature of oral Roma culture, as well as the early participation in adult life. Second, the participants reported that the monocultural Bulgarian curriculum and pedagogical approaches were not respectful of the traditional Roma cultural values, which makes the transition from home to school problematic and often affects negatively children’s learning and academic performance.

### Traditional Roma Cultural Values

**Role of family and community in the socialization of Roma children.** The perspectives of interviewed parents confirmed studies conducted in other cultural settings that Roma children’s lower educational performance in comparison to *gadjes* was largely due to the fact that schools follow *gadje* rules and Roma culture is generally unknown to them (Hancock, 2002; Smith, 1997). Consistent with earlier research on Roma groups in Europe, the parents who participated in my study talked about the priority of family over individual desires and described children’s upbringing as a process involving the entire community. However, this study extends the discussion of earlier research by highlighting collectivism and mutual sharing as significant cultural patterns. The participants in the three towns used the common narrative of educating children with the values of respect, generosity, and responsibility to share everything that one has. In Roma views, these values were in dissonance with the Bulgarian

worldview: while children from Bulgarian ethnic background were raised within a nuclear family where extended family members were rarely part of, Roma children were often nurtured, cared for, critiqued, or even punished for misdeeds by all members of the community. In return, children were expected to fully participate in community matters, perform work from an early age, and solve everyday community problems. Drawing on his own experience, one of the fathers, Kircho (47)<sup>3</sup>, was clear that respect for family members and kin is key in Roma worldview:

My extended family always comes first. An example: I work at the municipality and recently my second cousin asked me to help his son-in-law get a job. I'll do whatever it takes to help him because otherwise my kin will turn their back on me for not doing my family duty.

This view was supported during my observations in Kircho's community. Once, when I arrived in his home, Kircho's wife and daughter-in-law were making preserves for the winter: fruit and vegetable canning. Right after they saw me coming, they moved all the equipment out, quickly arranged the table for brunch, and left the room so that Kircho and I "can have peace and quiet," in his wife's words. However, when Kircho's mother entered the room, the man stood up to welcome her and offered her his own seat explaining that it was the most comfortable place in the room. Expressions of respect to elderly or guests were exemplified in each home I visited. Very often, I was offered a cup of coffee, snack, or a homemade pastry prepared specifically for my visit. My participants explained that treating guests well gave the hosts a good reputation in the community and at the same time it taught children the values of sharing, respect, and care of other's needs. One participant stated:

You have to accept what's offered to you because if you don't, you offend your hosts. And if you accept it from a child's hand, you praise the child for being generous and for learning the value of giving. In Gypsy culture, being stingy is the worst (Stefan, Town 1).

A woman from Town 3 confirmed this finding: "Our doors are always open. My community can see you entering my house; this is how we are: we know what's going on in each family's home. If I don't put food on the table, I will embarrass myself." Comments regarding living publicly, with an open door, and sharing everything with others, good and bad, were made throughout the research.

The public nature of Roma life and the tendency to engage in extensive verbal sharing, as contrasting to the Bulgarian way, has also been highlighted. Sofka (48) praised the conversational Roma culture, but she also commented on the discrepancy with the *gadje* world:

This way of ours, to have it out in the open, it's very different from your [Bulgarian] way. We live in a closed community where we're all like brothers and sisters ... Right there in front of the building [points at the Bulgarian neighborhood] I see two elderly ladies every day on my way to work. I've been observing them for years: they rarely talk to each other; they just sit and observe. Ours, in this situation, would talk all the time. We tell each other everything because our life is out public.

The conversational character of Roma culture and folklore, as noted by Reger and Gleason (1991) is an important feature of Roma life. When Roma children start school, as outlined by Smith (1997) and Kyuchukov (1999), the practice of conversing freely and often loudly can come in sharp contrast with school discipline, routine, and the requirement to be quiet. Reger and



Gleason (1991) and Smith (1997) make clear that unlike Western societies, in Roma culture stages such as walking or starting school are viewed as less important; however, the ability of small children to talk (so called *baby talk*) are perceived by the community “with interest and delight” (Smith, 1997, p. 245). Katya from Town 1 observed the interesting conflict that this cultural pattern created in school:

We encourage children to participate in story-telling; yet, in writing classes, where students compose fiction stories, our children do not do well. It seems to me that the requirement to write it down rather than tell it orally is what prevents our kids to show their narrative abilities.

Sofka also discussed children’s ability to narrate as not valued in school by adding that another cultural pattern—free conversations—brought some problems for her sons when they started school:

Writing and reading was the hardest for my boys. For some reason, they struggled with the concept: they could create stories when asked but to write it down, it was a different thing. Another challenge was to be quiet and not interrupt the teacher. Now, I know that speaking freely and interrupting adults is considered disrespectful among Bulgarians; I told my sons to sit still and be quiet but in the beginning they just did it by habit. In our culture, children are perceived as adults: we don’t mind if they interrupt us; in fact, we expect them to discuss family matters and propose solutions.

Ana (33) from Town 1 supported this view: “Our children are expected to solve adult problems; if there’s no food, they must think of a way to provide it for the family.”

Kolio from Town 3 cited an example of collectivism:

It was during the winter when my fifteen-year old son came home late one night. He heard that across the street our neighbors’ toddler was crying hungry. My son woke me up and asked me if I had any money. He took the money, bought bread and milk (this is happening in midnight), took the entire meal my wife had cooked for us, and gave it all to our neighbor. The next morning I asked him what he needed the money for and he said: ‘Dad, Ahmed’s kids were hungry so I gave our food to them’. I told him: ‘You did right, my son’. However, such generosity is not valued in school. My daughter’s teacher told her that she’s not supposed to share her snack with others (Kolio, 43).

Taking part in adult life while being attentive to others’ needs is not perceived as an asset in Bulgarian schools where the abilities to be quiet, look after yourself, pursue individual interests, and be competitive were valued. Moreover, the mismatch between cooperation and competitiveness presented another challenge for Roma children when transitioning to school. Another mainstream school rule—doing homework independently—was described as being in contrast with Roma community-oriented life and expectation:

In first grade, my granddaughter did her homework together with the neighbor’s child. Their papers were similar so the teacher gave them both Fs. My granddaughter learned the harder way that in school you don’t do things collectively: out there, you’re supposed to compete not to help (Gosho, 57).

In all my community visits, I witnessed the way Roma lived collectively. For example, when I arrived for an arranged interview with a female participant who was just making jam and pouring it into jars, I noticed that the activity was performed in front of her house with the help

of four neighbor women. Even though I suggested returning at a more convenient time, my informant insisted to be interviewed while her neighbors finish the work: "They're helping me now and I'll do the same for them when they need me," she explained. Other times, I saw large groups of people building houses, washing clothes, storing firewood, cracking nuts and sorting them. A collectivist way of life is also exemplified in the schools I observed. For instance, in a summer adult class in Town 2 students were engaged in a self-assessment, which was designed as an individual activity. However, the students (all of whom were women) chose to assess their performance in front of the entire class. One of them commented: "I have nothing to hide. We're not used to do things in private" (Nanka, 27). Roma people strongly believed in shared responsibility and did not hesitate to transfer this practice to schools. Often, during class observations, a Roma mother would enter the room and give her child instructions to either pick up small children from day care or cook a meal. Several respondents explained that they did not perceive class interruption as obstructive because children were supposed to navigate between adult responsibilities and studying in school.

Placing more value on family and community needs than individual needs was exemplified as an essential Roma feature that helped Roma people to maintain social cohesion. As highlighted by Smith (1997) in a review of research studies among Roma societies in Europe, "the needs of the Roma community are considered to be more important than an individual's need for social mobility" (p. 247). While in the structured school system children are expected to observe timetables, rules, and strict time, in the Roma life, family and community events always came first. When babies are born, a large family group visits the hospital and even participates in choosing its name, an act that is often considered by Bulgarians as *tsiganiya* (in Bulgarian, meaning "a Gypsy way of life" with a strong negative connotation). When children skip school because of such events, teachers perceive this as harmful for the educational process and often as a lack of interest in education. In one such case, I accompanied a teacher who went to the neighborhood to check why her student skipped school for a third day in a row. We found the student, Vanko, helping his family to build a house for his newly married brother. His father explained: "Our family is in the middle of building a house; Vanko can't go to school because his help is needed here."

Despite the importance of collectivism and mutual help, the parents who participated in this study made clear that becoming literate and graduating from high school were valued by them: "I want my daughter to go to college; I don't want her to struggle in life like me" (Ana, 33); "What is a man without a high school diploma nowadays? Nothing. I tell my son: no diploma, no chance for a job; study hard so that you can succeed" (Gosho, 57). By praising the value of school education, the parents opposed the mainstream perception that Roma were "uninterested in education." However, consistent with Hancock (2002), who observes the traditional Roma culture in the U.K. and North America, this study confirms that family and community provide children with a sense of security and often present the only constant unit of support and social solidarity.

**Early child independence.** The collectivism in Roma society has been described by the participants as an important factor in children's upbringing and preparation for adult life. A sense of support coming from family and community provides children with the freedom to move around the neighborhood and explore the world on their own from a very early age. The respondents pointed at child independence and free exploration as highly valued cultural practices. They highlighted that, unlike the Bulgarian way, in Roma society young children are very independent, and community care and support is what make such independence possible.

A comment typical of many was made by one Roma mother below:

Our children are very independent. I don't mind if my toddler plays outside while I do housework at home; he is with other kids and he has to learn how to look after himself. Other adults keep an eye on him and whenever he goes, he is safe. (Kalinka, 28)

Consistent with observations of the cultures of Spanish Gypsies (Poveda & Martin, 2004) and Gypsy Travelers in England (Levinson & Sparkes, 2004), my findings reveal that early in their life Roma children in Bulgaria are encouraged to move freely, explore the world around them, and participate in family work. During my observations, I noticed that older children often took care of younger siblings and cousins; little ones were often sent to do grocery shopping or to carry a message to a neighbor. While children become accustomed to this practice with the support of the entire community, they gradually acquire the ability to read parents' non-verbal communication messages from a very young age: I noticed that they would run over to the store or would take a crying baby out of the room often without being asked by adults to do so. The mothers often praised their daughters for doing housework and sons for helping with physical work or other activities that provide financial survival for the family. In parents' views, the independence of children is a significant aspect of forming the Roma ethnic identity that prepares youth for the responsibilities of adulthood, which in Roma life comes earlier compared to the outside society. On the other hand, parents in this study were aware that this dichotomy can obscure children's relationship with formal schools. For example, some mothers shared a disappointment of teachers' frustration of tardiness. Several mothers explained that children were expected to go to bed and wake up on their own. The decision to drop out of school or to persist was also often made by the child. On my question of why her nine-year-old son stopped going to school, Ivana (31) explained: "Because he doesn't want to. He wanted to be in the other teacher's class but it was full. So my kid said he wasn't going at all."

Child autonomy and the tendency of some Roma groups to live outdoors often contributes to children's unpleasant experience and rejection of school. Sofka stressed that independence helps children to become free individuals who are not accustomed to closed environments:

There are about twenty thousand people living in my community—*Gypsies, Musician Gypsies, Gradeshki Gypsies, Naked Gypsies*, and so forth ... Our neighborhood is crowded and noisy but is very united as well ... Children play outside until midnight and we don't ask them to get home. They play until late hours in night and they get home only when they get tired ... All Gypsies live outside, in front of their homes: they cook outside, they eat outside; they go home only to sleep. It's more spacious outside—that's why. So when kids start school, their freedom is over; they have to sit still for hours; they have to be quiet.

As noted also by Kyuchikov in Bulgaria (1999) and Levinson and Sparkes in the U.K. (2004), when children enter school, they are not accustomed to sitting for hours in an enclosed environment, performing class work that they consider boring, and remaining silent at the same time.

Finally, several parents in the study shared that when children started first grade, this was often perceived by mothers as an enforced separation. Several mothers talked about school as a distant and strange territory using the expressions "*chuzhdo myasto*" and "*chuzhdi hora*" (in Bulgarian, "foreign place" and "foreign/unfamiliar people"). Katya from Town 1 remembered:

On the first day, I took my son to school and got back home. Believe me, I cried the whole day and even my neighbors came to calm me. I felt as if I left him in prison; out of the neighborhood. I felt bad because I left my kid in a foreign place, among strangers ...

Another mother had similar feelings:

He was in the same class with his cousins but still, I felt so bad. Foreign people, you know; a foreign place. What if he didn't like his teacher? If he doesn't like her, I won't be able to make him go to school. It's my kid's right because if the teacher is not good, my son is not required to stay among foreigners there. (Anika, Town 2)

Another example supporting this finding comes from an observation in Town 3. One morning, I arrived to see Dzhenka (26) crying and a group of women gathered around her to soothe her. Dzhenka explained that her ten-year old son went to a summer camp for a first time. Even though the school camp was only several miles away, the mother was inconsolable:

I can't sleep; I can't eat my bread because my child is not at home. I haven't eaten for two days since he left. I swear to God [she makes the sign of the cross], I am very worried—my son is among strangers.

Dzhenka made arrangements with two mothers to visit the children even though they were supposed to return home in just three days.

Parents in this study expected to have relative-like relationships with teachers and stressed that this was an important prerequisite for children's engagement with class work. Some participants noted that when teachers "do care" they could identify at-risk students on the spot and provide valuable support for them. However, in parents' views, not many teachers adopted their styles to help Roma children transition to school.

### **Implications of Cultural Mismatch: Monocultural Curriculum and Monolingual Instruction**

Another possible point of conflict between the Roma world and Bulgarian schools, according to the study participants, is the feeling that the Roma language and bilingualism are not validated in school. Several participants felt like Romani is not seen as an asset but rather, as an obstacle for children's learning:

We speak Gypsy language in our community so when children start school it's challenging for those of them who don't understand Bulgarian. I wrote to the Ministry of Education that we need a support to build a Library or a classroom in the neighborhood so we can teach Bulgarian as a second language. I do that in the attached room to the Evangelical church for free. I play educational games and teach children using Bulgarian ABC books. Bulgarian needs to be taught like a second language. (Ticho, Town 2)

Bulgarian teachers can learn Romani ... what's wrong with that? If we can speak Bulgarian they can learn Romani. But they think our language is inferior. (Kircho's mother, 82)

Another participant added that by not allowing children to speak Romani in school, the

government violates their human rights:

We are Bulgarian nationals but we're also proud of being Roma. So why do they deprive us of our right to speak Romani? Let's say, in America, how many ethnicities do they have? Many. But they are all allowed to speak their mother tongues. (Damyan, Town 3)

While Damyan was discussing the issue, his nine-year-old daughter who was around added, "I am not allowed to speak Gypsy language at school ... My teacher says: 'Speak Bulgarian. You live in Bulgaria not in Gypsyland'."

Roma parents in this study insisted that their language and culture must be included in the mainstream curriculum. Some of them noted that the curriculum was disconnected from Roma children's culture, saying, "The school where my daughter goes does not provide any second language support. I think that this should be addressed in the education law. Also, non-Roma students should learn about our culture—this will make them more tolerant." (Ivanka, Town 3)

In parents' views, cultural knowledge can help fight stereotypes and create more acceptance within the mainstream society. As one father stated:

I read about the new minister of integration in Hungary. Because of him, in every Hungarian school all students study Roma history ... I think in Bulgaria history lessons must include Roma history. We study world history, so let Bulgarians study about us too. This will bring Gypsies and Bulgarians closer to each other. (Ticho)

Two other parents reported that children could choose an elective Roma folklore class but since it was held after school not many students took advantage. In their opinion, offering the class after school was a way to marginalize indigenous knowledge and sabotage the program. Katya, whose son was among the very few attending an integrated school, shared that there were not Roma classes in his school. She reported that in their regular schedule, children did not have any lessons about Roma. Katya recalled that the only information about the Roma was in her daughter's literature textbook: a short tale about the story of Rrom, the first Roma man: "My daughter was so excited when she found this story. She read it to our whole family at dinner."

Furthermore, several participants reported children being uncomfortable in history classes. Kiwi (male, 65) explained a Roma cultural belief:

Gypsies hate to talk about dead people. When a person is dead, he's dead; it's all gone. We give or sell his belongings and forget. When kids are supposed to memorize and cite stories about dead people, like historical figures, they don't feel comfortable and teachers often think children don't know their lesson.

As noted in Berhier (1979) who observed the socialization of "Gypsy" children in European Roma societies, speaking about dead people is connected to the idea of a shame and impurity that has the potential to challenge children's performance in school. Furthermore, such lack of knowledge about cultural practices has the potential to alienate Roma children from formal education. When students' culture is not appreciated in school, this often represents a barrier that prevents minority children and parents from finding meaning in graduating from school.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The Roma parents in this study attributed the generally low academic outcomes of children to the lack of understanding of Roma cultural patterns and the disconnect that this created for their children attending school in Bulgaria. Similar to studies that highlighted North American minority cultures as being neglected by mainstream school systems (such as Bourdieu, [1986] and Collins [2012], among others), this research revealed that in the Bulgarian education system, there is no consideration of children's cultural "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Parents described children's maturity, the ability to share and be generous to members of the group, and responsibility to family and community as fundamentals of children's social and cognitive development that can provide a meaningful educational experience if matched with the culture of schools.

The current study found out that home and school contexts hold different expectations of children to exercise creative writing and memorize folklore and literature stories, but also demonstrated how Roma students' learning in school can be contextualized with a special attention to cultural patterns. Storytelling and the dialogical nature of oral Roma culture can provide for the design of culturally relevant instructional strategies to improve Roma children's reading and composition skills. Lack of attention to Roma bilingualism presents another obstacle for students to utilize their experience of telling lengthy stories—when there is insufficient second language support, Roma students can rarely apply this ability in mainstream classroom. When students are not fluent in the mainstream language, they cannot unfold their potential because of the different codes of classroom and interaction styles (Hancock, 2002; Kyuchukov, 2011). Furthermore, because schools observe strict discipline and timetables, Roma children's problem-solving abilities contradict the focus that schools place on listening and obedience.

The results also indicated that through their early independence and participation in adult life, Roma children acquired the ability to share responsibilities and support their communities' lives. This finding is consistent with Kyuchukov (2000; 2011) who observed that a major conflict between Roma and mainstream Bulgarian cultures comes from the contrasting ways in which Roma and *gadje* children are socialized. The parents held the perception that Roma people's focus on child independence and free choice often presents an obstacle for students' learning in mainstream classrooms "where they are rarely able to initiate or create their own learning experiences" (Smith, 1997, p. 243).

### Final Remarks

Equal and fair inclusion of Roma people into the mainstream societies of Europe is long overdue. Prejudice and discrimination continue to sustain socio-economic exclusion while dominant narratives of Roma as "indifferent to education" have persisted (Claveria & Alonso, 2003). Over the course of this research, challenges of access, topic acceptance, and reluctant participation of mainstream teachers echoed the conclusion of earlier studies that "research into issues involving Roma children ... is not very welcome among society as a whole" (Kyuchukov, 1999, p.161). The findings indicate that the exclusion of Roma children in education corresponds to what Knaus and Rogers-Ard (2012) call "educational genocide"—the practice of silencing minority youth "through top-down standardization of middle-class white ways of thinking and expression" (p. 31). I thus argue that the Bulgarian education system needs to implement

education reform to develop intercultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy. Schools must seek connections with Roma families and communities and must utilize features of the traditional Roma community-based informal education to empower Roma students as agents of their own educational process.

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### Notes

- 1 A word that Roma people use for non-Roma (including Bulgarians).
- 2 I choose the term “Halimata” to describe this Roma subgroup as it was the term used by its members when they referred to themselves. This was also the way the other Roma groups in the community called them.
- 3 All names of individuals in this article are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

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*Veselina Lambrev* is a Lecturer and Ed.D. Program mentor at the College of Education, University of Hawai'i at Manoa. She received her doctorate in comparative and international education and educational foundations in 2015. Veselina's research revolves around issues of access and equity for underrepresented students (including cultural and ethnolinguistic issues), and she is interested in education transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, including historical aspects, political processes, and higher education reform. Her current research and writing concern the role of Teacher education programs in overcoming the issue of otherness in pedagogical theory and practice as well as practice theory in higher education context.