

Culturally aware but not yet ready to teach the “others”

Reflections on a Roma education teacher training programme

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Abstract

Purpose – In this paper, the authors focus on a professional development programme in Cyprus aiming to enhance teachers’ intercultural understanding, awareness and competencies. This paper aims to focus on trainers’ and teacher trainees’ reflections upon a teacher professional development programme in the primary school in Cyprus with the largest number of Roma children.

Design/methodology/approach – The training was provided by a small team of six trainers. Immediately after each training session, each trainer participated in an interview, while three of the trainers participated also in a focus-group interview at the end of the training. The trainers’ data were complemented by semi-structured interviews with a number of trainees either before or after the training. All interviews were transcribed, while interview questions comprised the framework for the qualitative analysis. The findings are presented by means of content analysis which formed the basis for emerging themes.

Findings – The authors claim that trainee teachers appeared culturally aware and sensitive, as well as knowledgeable about intercultural education; furthermore, they seemed to implement different teaching methodologies and curriculum interventions to support Roma children’s inclusion in the local school community. At the same time, they seemed to adopt instrumental approaches towards the content and purpose of the programme, seeking explicit instructional guidelines, plans and heuristics to deal with Roma inclusion. Considering the mis-recognition of teachers’ efforts by stakeholders outside the school and the expectations of the educational authorities – voiced via their school inspectors – teachers desperately asserted the need for tangible strategies to help them cope with difference in their classrooms.

Research limitations/implications – The authors argue that such professional development programmes should aim at facing, deconstructing and bringing to the fore prejudices and discrimination against the Other/s by valuing teachers, first, as reflective individuals and, second, as professionals with their own cultural backgrounds and identities, on which any training programme, of the kind presented in this paper, could start from and build on.

Practical implications – Even though there is no tailored magic recipe to make teachers’ daily professional enterprise in multicultural settings easy, to help teachers master the necessary knowledge, skills and confidence, the authors suggest that training should be directly linked to classroom practice and acknowledge stress and helplessness that accompany work in multicultural school settings.

Social implications – The inclusion strategy in many educational systems needs to become more comprehensive to cope with varying sources of social exclusion, faced by vulnerable groups of a different cultural background, such as Roma. Teacher training thus needs to meet the challenges of working in a diverse and multicultural environment in general and with Roma children in particular. In view of the multicultural character of local societies, a more critically oriented humanistic education is needed based on tolerance and understanding.



Originality/value – The limited participation of Roma in the school system could be related to teachers' (mis)conceptions about the Roma culture and that the widely different ways in which Roma relate to schooling are often disregarded by the school.

Keywords Multicultural, Education, Equity, Pedagogy

Paper type Research Paper

Introduction

International and European bodies recommend the surge for improving the socio-economic status and social inclusion of the 10-12 million Roma people, scattered throughout Europe and the rest of the world. The attention on Roma issues by policymakers over the past two decades was renewed, enhancing the interest on Roma inclusion in Europe, particularly in the European Union. For instance, in 2011 the European Commission launched the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) to address discrimination and reduce the gap between Roma and non-Roma in access to employment, education, housing and healthcare (Naydenova, 2016), whereas the 2013 Council Recommendation on effective Roma integration measures resulted in respective actions in member states, funded under the European Structural and Investment Fund for 2014-2020 (European Commission, 2016).

Despite these efforts, policy action and reforms do not seem to have prompted significant improvements in raising barriers to equal access to resources and decision-making of Roma populations. Thus, Roma continue to be the most disadvantaged ethnic group across Europe. As the European Commission (2016) points, measures adopted by member states did not succeed in preventing exclusion of Roma from the workplace, while member states are experiencing a revival of forced evictions of Roma. Local European authorities continue to implement policies that force Roma, Gypsies and Travellers to move to settled accommodation, often in poor conditions (Muižnieks, 2016). For instance, the UK Amnesty International called the authorities to stop planned evictions of homeless Irish Traveller families or families without adequate alternative housing ("Romano_Liloro" Roma Virtual Network, 2011a), which continued in 2015. In the wake of the economic crisis in Europe, even traditionally affluent societies like the Scandinavian countries experienced an influx of Roma, who made a living through begging, collecting bottles, and doing informal street work and slept outside in parks, on pavements, in cars or camped in the woods (Britt Djuve *et al.*, 2015).

In view of the continuous social exclusion of Roma populations in Europe, this paper focuses on Roma in Cyprus. Since education is identified as the primary tool of Roma empowerment (Dunajeva, 2017) and schools remain a powerful institution shaping and regulating social identities (Ferguson, 2001), the study reports on a teacher professional development programme offered in the primary school in Cyprus with the largest number of Roma children. The programme was undertaken within the framework of a European Union funded project entitled INSETRom (IN-SERVICE Training for Roma Inclusion, 134018-LLP-1-2007-1-CY-COMENIUS-CMP). This paper illustrates trainers' and trainees' reflections upon the particular programme to provide recommendations for professional development better suited to meet the needs of the teachers teaching Roma children.

A review of the literature

Roma in Europe

It has been frequently claimed that racism against Roma is both systemic and societal and is stepped in centuries of distrust (Tharoor, 2016). Over the years, however, as already discussed above, bias against Roma seems to have accelerated in Europe.

Currently, as the [European Economic and Social Committee \(2016\)](#) suggests, the effective implementation of national integration strategies is prevented by anti-gypsyism. Apparently, the European refugee crisis has exacerbated xenophobia, also affecting Roma. Recent polls in different parts of Europe highlight unfavourable views of the Roma by huge proportions of people ([Tharoor, 2016](#)). These views and attitudes have been very strong in countries with populous Roma populations, such as Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Brutalities (e.g. the humiliation of six Roma detainees by policemen in Kosice, Slovakia in April 2009) and racist outbursts (e.g. the television advertisement of the right-wing party NS in the Czech Republic referring to the “final solution for the gypsy issue” in May 2009), were followed two years later by a statement of president Klaus that the situation was horrifying as to the strong statements against Romani citizens (“[Romano, Lilor](#)” [Roma Virtual Network, 2011b](#)). Moreover, incidents like the one with the Italian sunbathers ignoring with indifference two drowned Roma girls in July 2008 rocked Europe for the possibility of European societies being gripped by anti-Roma feelings. More recently, in Italy, for instance, anti-Gypsyism appears to have increased and they are accompanied by the widespread use of racist language in political discourse and the lack of progress in law amendments to protect Roma from discrimination ([Rorke, 2016](#)). As another example, in the UK, the number of victims of racist attacks recorded as “gypsy/traveller, Polish white and other white” in Scotland seems to have risen by 410 per cent between 2005 and 2014 ([The Conversation, 2016](#)).

Not surprisingly, social isolation for Roma has been accompanied with educational exclusion, as only one per cent of Roma are college educated and most Roma generations remain illiterate. In a survey report in 2011 across 11 EU member states, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and UNDP highlighted that on average, only half of all Roma children in EU countries attend pre-school or kindergarten, while just 15 per cent of young Roma complete upper secondary education. Moreover, several studies (e.g. in the UK, [Cudworth, 2008](#); in Spain, [Mariano, 2004](#); in Cyprus, [Demetriou and Trimikliniotis, 2007](#); [Symeou, 2015](#)) express concerns over Roma children’s educational exclusion and underachievement. [Naydenova \(2016\)](#) argues about the high educational segregation of Roma in countries like Slovakia and Serbia, where Roma children are sent to schools for mentally disabled children, while in the Czech Republic and Hungary, Roma children are also reported to experience high levels of discrimination. Roma children face frequent racist bullying and name calling, which are often not acknowledged by the school ([Lloyd and Stead, 2001](#); [Theodorou and Symeou, 2013](#)). [Jovanovic et al. \(2014\)](#) argue that teachers place Roma children in the back rows, call them insulting names, allow them to skip classes and frequently have very low expectations of them.

[Derrington \(2007\)](#) identifies several “pull and push” factors that impact Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children’s school engagement and retention, the strongest being cultural dissonance – a result of conflicting expectations between home and school. To deal with psychosocial stress, students who rely on maladaptive coping strategies, such as fight (physical and verbal retaliation and non-compliance), flight (self-imposed exclusion) and playing white (passing identity by concealing or denying one’s heritage), tend to drop out of school early, while those who display more adaptive strategies – such as cognitive reframing, developing social support networks and adopting a bicultural identity – tend to stay in school up to the age of 16.

Roma in Cyprus

Roma in Cyprus (*Cigani/Tsigani*) are one of the smallest minorities living on the island. Roma appear to have first arrived in Cyprus between 1322 and 1400 ([Marsh and Strand, 2003](#)). During

the eighteenth century, most Roma were reported as *Ghurbeti* (Muslim), whereas fewer were known as *Mandi* (Christian). In 1960, with the independence of the Republic of Cyprus, the Roma population became officially part of the Turkish-Cypriot community (Administrative Commissioner, 2003). The Roma of Cyprus were never recognised as a national or religious minority or a group with a certain identity and culture (Demetriou and Trimikliniotis, 2007; Trimikliniotis, 2007).

Following the 1974 Turkish invasion and the forced transfer of Greek-Cypriots living to the south and the Turkish-Cypriots to the north, most Roma moved to the north of the country. However, since 1999 several Roma moved to the south part of the country – mainly Limassol and Paphos – and settled in socio-economically deprived areas of the two towns. When travel restrictions across the demarcation line were eased in April 2003, the influx of Roma to the south increased, while migration between the two parts of the island became more regular. Altogether, Roma reach approximately 1,500 people, of whom 570 live in the south (UNOPS, 2004), most of them speaking today Turkish. Yet, there is some argument that Roma in Cyprus reach 2000-3000 people, resulting from the annual influx of illegal Anatolian Romanlar who came to Cyprus since the late 1970s and live in the Turkish occupied areas of the country. This information cannot be confirmed, as the Republic of Cyprus does not hold official records on the Roma.

Roma in Cyprus has been ignored, avoided and marginalised (Demetriou and Trimikliniotis, 2007; Trimikliniotis, 2007). Reports refer to them as one of the local socially excluded groups (European Commission, 2005). With regards to access to education, Roma pupils enrol in Greek-Cypriot schools, like any other child at school age. Despite attempts of the social services to convince Roma families to urge their children to attend and stay in school, Roma parents appear to see no reason to send their children to school, get into fights and feel excluded (Hadjithedoulou-Loizidou and Symeou, 2007; Trimikliniotis, 2007; Theodorou and Symeou, 2013). High levels of drop-outs are also persistent (Symeou, 2015), while Roma maintain negative attitudes towards education (Demetriou and Trimikliniotis, 2007; Symeou, 2015). In addition, as elsewhere, Roma seem to face racial prejudice. Roma appear segregated in schools with high concentration of migrants, minorities, and Greek-Cypriots from poorer backgrounds, despite the official policy of non-segregation. The inadequacy of the school curricula, the absence of relevant teacher training, the language barriers, and the overall failure of the system to recognise Roma culture and its contribution to society have been reported as the factors predetermining Roma poor performance in schools (Symeou *et al.*, 2009).

Teacher training and multicultural education

In view of the issues discussed above, teachers teaching Roma children certainly need to develop cultural awareness, as well as the capacity to perceive and recognise the conflicts and problems that Roma may face. Teachers' practices need to challenge dominant power, established social hierarchies and unfair distributions of privilege (Gorgi, 2008). Multicultural education requires shifts of consciousness enabling reactions to the socio-political context that influences education theory and practice.

In this regard, as Bhopal (2004) suggests, teachers working in ethnically mixed classes should be trained and supported by experts and intercultural mediators (Bhopal, 2004). Intercultural training programmes, as Carignan *et al.* (2005) argue, should emphasise interdependence, interconnections and interrelationships. If issues of cultural and racialized diversity are not explored in depth, learning about and to live with the "other" can be superficial. To challenge Eurocentric beliefs and practices and move from a singular, monocultural reality, to a worldview that is respectful of multiple belief systems, self-awareness is necessary (Guo *et al.*, 2009). In addition, empathy -as the awareness of others'

perspectives- is critical, and moral feelings and emotions are fundamental. Putting themselves in another person's shoes, feeling what the other feels, is not only an intellectual exercise but also a movement implying affection. In addition, connections of critical reflective thinking with real-world problems of multiculturalism are necessary (Li and Lal, 2005). Teachers' experiences with diversity and careful reflection on these experiences with the help of professional tutors can strongly influence participants' cultural awareness and acceptance of cultural differences (Taylor, 1994). Thus, empathy and affection along with critical reflection as well as self-awareness should be embedded in teacher training programmes.

In addition, to examine diversity and support inclusive teaching practices, substantive practical knowledge is required (Guo *et al.*, 2009). Various studies point to the inefficiency of de-contextualised professional development with minimal opportunities for follow-up activities. Training that fails to consider the professional contexts in which teachers operate or set connections between training activities and school agendas appears meaningless. Professional development needs to be tailored to teachers' prior background and establish channels for exchange of the wealth of participants' experiences. Such an approach could address a weakness of the teaching profession which frequently is "not structured to easily tap into the expertise of practitioners" (Tuomi, 2004, p. 301). In this direction, action research is often employed to encourage an intercultural and inclusive approach (Sales *et al.*, 2011).

Methodological issues

The project

The teacher professional development programme described in this paper was implemented in the state primary school with the largest Roma school population in the country. The school was located in a low socio-economic urban area and its population constituted largely by Roma, Turkish-Cypriot and non-Greek speaking students. To identify the training needs of teachers and thus provide the basis for curriculum development for the teacher in-service training on Roma educational inclusion, data on Roma children's schooling and education was collected through semi-structured interviews with a sample of teachers, Roma parents and their children. Before data collection, rapport with the teaching staff and Roma families was established. Interviews were transcribed and the comparisons between the three groups underlined similarities and differences in their perceptions across various themes.

Based on the findings of this needs assessment, an analytic teacher training curriculum was designed. The curriculum included goals, modules and methodology and targeted curricular sections, as these evolved through the preceding needs assessment study. The modules included Culture and enculturation, Stereotypes and prejudices, Roma history, Roma culture, Cultures of the schools-The arts and cultural diversity, Intercultural education, Classroom management and methodology, Curriculum development and Teacher-Parent communication.

Following the development of the curriculum, teacher in-service training was provided for all personnel (teachers, school psychologists, teacher assistants, socio-medical assistants, missionary assistants). Based on the assumption that the development of adequate teacher in-service training along with the improvement of classroom practice and family-school-community relationships can foster Roma inclusion and equity, the training aimed to enhance teachers' intercultural understanding, awareness and competencies and to support trainees to apply intervention strategies to involve Roma parents in their children's education by effectively communicating with parents and developing action plans at class and/or school level. Each training session lasted three hours and took place at the school. Out of the 17 trainee participants, 14 were teachers with Roma children in their class, and

three were local social agents, involved with Roma people in the local community. The training was provided by a small team of six trainers.

The study

Within the scope of the project above, this particular study aimed to illustrate perceptions of trainers and trainees with regards to the teacher training programme. A phenomenological perspective was adopted, emphasising the subjective realities of participants embedded in the particular context (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991; Churchill *et al.*, 1997). With focus set on portraying personal accounts of human experience, participants' narratives allowed voices to be heard, thus providing "political and powerful edge" (Gray, 1998, p. 22).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, chosen to highlight teachers' and trainers' views, perceptions and meanings. Interviews appeared to be a powerful avenue to provide analytic and wide-ranging answers, suggestions and opinions (Cohen and Manion, 1994; Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Fontana and Frey, 1994; LeCompte and Preissle, 1993; Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Immediately after each training session, each trainer participated in an individual interview, while three of the trainers also participated in a focus-group interview at the end of the training. The trainers' data were complemented by semi-structured interviews with a number of trainees either before or after the training.

Because of the exploratory character of the study, the interview schedule remained semi-structured and collected interviewees' insights on issues such as strengths, weaknesses and barriers of the offered training along with sustainability and impact of the training on everyday school practice. In more specific, interviewees were asked about their views on the content, the clarity of presentation, the training methodology, its duration and the trainers. Moreover, they were asked to indicate training modules that they considered most and least valuable and the modules that they considered most and least useful for their teaching practice; furthermore, to indicate the extent to which training met their expectations, as well as their levels of confidence teaching Roma students, teaching Roma issues and addressing stereotypes. Finally, interviewees were asked to draw links to their teaching practices and indicate the strategies that they intended to use to implement new insights and materials after the training, along with possible barriers in implementing ideas and strategies, resulting from the training programme.

Despite an effort for consistency, schedules were kept flexible to allow relevant issues to emerge, while probes elicited deeper thoughts from the respondents and enriched the accounts provided. All interviews were transcribed, while interview questions comprised the framework for the qualitative analysis.

A descriptive content analysis approach was adopted, involving inductive coding techniques (Seidman, 1998); responses were categorised and sub-categorised into thematic groups to allow data interpretation. Data analysis followed Miles *et al.*'s (2013) stages, namely, data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. Specifically, data were interrogated in relation to the present and the future. The findings derived formed the basis for emerging sub-themes within each category, as discussed below.

Findings: trainers' reflections and teachers' reactions

Reflections on the present

Knowledge and awareness. Reflecting upon their experiences, trainers considered that participating teachers appeared culturally aware and sensitive towards cultural differences. In addition, teachers seemed conscious of contemporary intercultural education perspectives. They also reported implementing different teaching methodologies and curriculum interventions to support Roma children's inclusion in

the school learning community. As one of the trainers explained, “Throughout the session, a few teachers described initiatives that they took to include Roma children in the learning community” (Trainer 4).

Teachers’ knowledge and awareness appeared to be self-initiated and only few suggested to consider themselves adequately trained. As one teacher explained during the interview, after her appointment at the specific school and while feeling unprepared to teach a culturally diverse population, she took initiatives by herself for her own professional development to enhance her relevant knowledge and skills. “After 5 years of dealing with them [i.e. Roma children], I now feel confident that I can make it”, she reported (Teacher 4). Most other teachers claimed that they did not feel adequately trained at all and that, no matter if they had participated earlier in any training, they did not feel well trained. As they clarified, they had “attended only a few short relevant training sessions” (Teacher 2) and their teaching was “based purely on personal knowledge and interest” (Teacher 1).

Similar was teachers’ evaluation of their ability to relate to Roma’s culture and history. Interviewed teachers attributed their efforts and initiatives to become more knowledgeable about Roma to their own interest to improve teaching strategies with the Roma pupils. They also referred to their empirical knowledge acquired through day-to-day experience with Roma children during the years they were appointed in the specific school:

I do this job without having any training that would enable me to teach this specific group of pupils. Part from what I know for these people [the Roma] comes from my experience and part of it from what I read. I would like to know more through organized seminars that would be designed for us -teachers in this kind of schools- and our needs. These seminars should be designed and executed by experts. (Teacher 2)

I have not acquired any knowledge on Roma culture on an organized basis. I have read by myself several books. For the first time, I learned about the Roma through my school experiences [...] I would like more organized seminars from specialists. (Teacher 5)

Although teachers resumed initiatives and experiences of teaching ethnically mixed classrooms, their accounts reflected inadequate training background and lack of specialised knowledge on Roma and their education. More importantly, their (long in some cases) experiences with diversity appeared not to have been brought to the fore in professional development settings, in ways that [Taylor \(1994\)](#) would suggest to influence their cultural awareness and acceptance of cultural differences. Moreover, recommendations that all teachers are properly trained to teach in a multicultural environment and react to manifestations of racism or discrimination in schools [Second ECRI Report on Cyprus \(European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, 2001\)](#), have not taken effect. Consequently, teachers in this school strived to become “more inclusive”, while the destructiveness of prejudice and the exclusion which follows a denial of difference failed to be recognised.

Instrumental approaches. Teachers’ overall reaction to the content of the training during the sessions revealed an instrumental approach, with a focus on explicit instructional guidelines, plans and heuristics (including textbooks and materials) to help them deal with the situation at hand. Some teachers stated:

Anything that is relevant to Roma! From how to teach language and mathematics to these children to how to make them want to learn something in the school. (Teacher 1)

To learn the way how to handle these children. (Teacher 7)

It is absolutely necessary to create teaching material for language and mathematics immediately. This material should correspond to the interests and the way Roma children think and act. (Teacher 8)

Given that the curriculum constructed and delivered by the trainers aimed mainly to enhance trainees' understanding and perspectives of teaching in multicultural environments, trainees' query for practical tips and structured guidelines was not easily handled by the trainers. One trainer described her experience as follows:

Some of the teachers were particularly resistant to the introductory activities included in the module [I taught]. While initially eager to discuss the case studies that introduced the session, they soon started to vocally raise their resistance, positing that they were facing similar issues in their everyday lives and asking for practical ways to deal with those. There was even one teacher who vividly argued that she did not participate in the training to share her experience, but rather because she wanted to be told what to do in her everyday teaching. This caused me to skip anything that was not a direct recommendation for teaching and learning. (Trainer 4)

Hence, most teachers expressed resistance to some of the proposed activities, and, at the same time, desperately asserted the need for strategies to help them cope with difference in their classrooms. Some stated in the post-training interviews:

We did not receive answers for the essential and practical problems we teachers face in dealing with and helping Roma children in specific. (Teacher 12)

Even though it was very experientially presented, we deal with even more complicated situations in our everyday life. Instead of receiving practical advice, we gave so many things to the discussion. (Teacher 6)

Some teachers found some relevance to what they expected from the delivered training. This was mainly related to the more concrete and tangible examples provided by the trainers which, as the trainers explained, could relate to their day-to-day practice:

The teachers showed interest in the suggested activities [. . .] A few of them discussed with me particular issues that they faced, and especially what they perceived as lack of interest in and understanding on behalf of the Roma children of the logics of reading and writing per se. I provided many ideas on how to get them interested in written language and help them understand the functions thereof (e.g. through the use of image, video, interdisciplinary projects, or even alphabet and vocabulary charts), which were positively perceived by some. However, there was a general sense and request for a concrete instructional plan (including textbooks and materials) that would guide them through the process and ensure that native Greek speakers or students with basic Greek language skills would not be left behind. (Trainer 2)

Some of the examples that stood out were the composition of multilingual songs and recording of a CD, the dramatization of texts by students and video recording of those performances to enhance reading and understanding, the organization of interdisciplinary projects with music and language arts being central in those, and so forth. (Trainer 5)

During the training, trainers faced also teachers' anger and disappointment with the Ministry of Education and Culture and the inspectorate who they thought mis-recognised their efforts to effectively include Roma children. Teachers thought that they received no substantial official training support. Trainers found out from the teachers during the training sessions that stakeholders outside the school and the educational authorities were constantly setting specific expectations, voiced via the school's inspectors:

The role of teachers was explicitly discussed and it was here that trainees stressed the need for the official curriculum to recognise and include Roma. The official curriculum as they said might never proceed in this differentiation and this exerts a huge responsibility on the teacher of the class. The role of the project was also discussed as a form of professional support to them, which is not deriving though from the state and the Ministry. Their major complaint is that the Ministry (through its inspectors) does not recognise in practice the difference of this school and Roma as a distinct cultural group and expect the same academic outcomes as from any other school [...] a kind of dis-recognition or colour-blindness on behalf of the Ministry. (Trainer 1)

A lot of the stress felt by the teachers was rooted in their perception of helplessness and isolation. They felt unable to do anything that could make a difference, unsupported by the Ministry, in no contact with the parents, and overwhelmed by expectations, curriculum restrictions, responsibilities, and lack of time. All of these are issues that cannot be effectively addressed by any training or by any training alone without change in structural provisions and demands by the Ministry. (Trainer 2)

Yet, the most interesting point was the teachers' comments that school inspectors and the Ministry of Education were more interested in them ensuring high academic standards or keeping up with the mandated curriculum. I perceived this to be extremely important for considering the implications of the INSETRom project. Specifically, teachers' feelings that their efforts went unnoticed is telling of the ways the project should not only aim at enhancing teacher training and practice, but also finding ways to make such good practice visible, reach stakeholders outside the classroom, and eventually affect policy. (Trainer 4)

In conclusion, the training programme, as implemented, was considered as not adequate to address overall teacher concerns about Roma educational inclusion. Even after the training, most teachers claimed they lacked sufficient knowledge, skills and confidence to work optimally with Roma children and parents. They also indicated the need for further training in view of everyday classroom challenges, thus possibly echoing [Guo et al. \(2009\)](#) suggestions for founding inclusive teaching practices on substantive practical knowledge is required. These conclusions appear in line with those of other studies that underline teachers' concerns about the difficulty of integrated schooling ([Trentin et al., 2006](#)), and the demand for teacher training, directly linked to classroom practice ([Craig et al., 1998](#)), as pointed earlier in this paper.

Reflections on the future

Teachers as cultural beings. Teachers stated that they would like to become more trained on Roma culture ("so that we do not do any mistakes in approaching Roma children"; Teacher 6), Roma history, and Roma interests. In addition, they would like to know more about teaching methods and material, curriculum and textbooks that would enhance Roma children's interest and commitment, and make them happy in school, as a teacher noted:

[...] To know about their history [...] from where they came [...] how they appeared in our country [...] why they were not affiliated in the system [...]. (Teacher 3)

Roma apparently like music and sports [...] Also, girls like dancing, but after they are 11 years they start helping in housework and taking care of their younger siblings. (Teacher 1)

Once one of the female teachers got into conflict with a student, who threatened to beat her up. I ask the student 'Don't I get angry with you as well?' The student answers 'Yes, but you are 'human' (man)'. This is a social dimension of their culture; that it is OK for a man to get angry but not for a woman. We need social research studies to know more about Roma culture. (Teacher 2)

[Pecek et al. \(2008\)](#) also indicated that teachers – as the key players in implementing inclusion in practice – need to become sensitive to Roma language and culture. Similarly, [Kyuchukov \(2000\)](#) proposes anti-bias education for non-Roma teachers working with Roma to overcome existing prejudices and racism. Thus, specialised training, not only in multicultural or intercultural education but also on Roma culture and history could be provided to Greek-Cypriot teachers with Roma children in their classrooms.

As the trainers of the training program indicated:

They tended to expand a lot during the discussion; this was extremely useful and productive, particularly because this was more obvious on issues relating to Roma and Roma in Cyprus in more specific [. . .]. It was there shown that they know and acknowledge that they have other values about education and the school as a social-professional group compared to Roma; and that these differ much [. . .]. The discussion about this was enhanced through the movie 'Freedom Writers' and when we referred to how different was the value placed on education and the school institution in different eras in Cyprus itself (e.g. reaction of Greek-Cypriots against the establishment of compulsory schooling in Cyprus during the British Colonial years). (Trainer 1)

They needed specific historical and background information regarding their students that could help them familiarize themselves more with some of the students' cultural practices [. . .] I believe that some theoretical basis is necessary in every training session and that there is no checklist one could use as a recipe for such things. (Trainer 2)

This was more obvious when trying to find a way to balance curriculum demands and dominant cultural practices of/within the Cypriot context, such as the Morning Prayer or teaching Christian Orthodoxy for example, with the values and practices of their Roma students. (Trainer 2)

Also, before planning a training tailored for particular schools/teachers, etc., it might be helpful to ask the teachers involved what their needs are and design the trainings accordingly to the extent possible. Additionally, some follow-up is needed as well as evaluation of the training by the teachers: was this helpful or not? How, if at all, was what was shared in the training used? (Trainer 2)

Training aiming to enhance teachers' understanding of Roma could enable them to respond to the challenge of teaching in classrooms, where manifestations of discriminatory attitudes are apparent. More importantly though, such training could aim at facing, deconstructing and bringing to the fore teachers' prejudices and discrimination against the Other/s. Focus could be placed on teachers as cultural entities and "cultural beings" (as they are, in fact), that is people with beliefs and perceptions, situated subjects and actors. Rather than providing factual information about Roma history and culture, training could address essentializing Roma (and other marginalised children) in the school, as well as their within-group diversity. As [Themelis and Foster \(2013\)](#) argue, the history, language and culture of Roma communities should not be approached on a segregated basis, thus depriving non-Roma of the right to know about the contributions Roma have made to their own and other European societies ([Council of Europe \(COE\), 2012](#), p. 19).

In this regard, any demand for teachers to change their everyday pedagogical practices to enhance educational inclusion of Roma needs to pay attention to teachers' beliefs, perceptions, attitudes and expectations as cultural entities about the Other – in this case Roma children and families. Teachers need to be valued first as reflective individuals and second as professionals, who possess their own, personal culture and identity, on which any relevant intervention, of the kind presented in this study, should embark from, and build on.

Practicality in focus. Teachers' feelings of stress and helplessness in working in multicultural school settings could be also addressed. Even though there is no tailored magic recipe for making teachers' daily professional enterprise in multicultural settings an easy one, to master sufficient knowledge, skills and confidence to work optimally in such settings, any training should be directly linked to classroom practice, and even more, reflect on how other practitioners have dealt with similar issues:

Yet, perhaps when aimed at practitioners, such trainings could include concrete examples of how others have coped with similar issues and/or on how specific material can be developed through/ during the training. (Trainer 2)

Trentin *et al.* (2006) underline teachers' concerns about the difficulties of implementing integrated schooling and report a medium level of willingness towards integration, suggesting that teachers with a favourable attitude towards Roma but without direct experience in integrated schools significantly underestimate the burden of the added workload. As Hemelsoet (2015, p. 14) stresses, teachers place attention on the need to "understand the phenomena they are confronted with in their everyday work. As loci of pedagogical action, they 'have to get involved' and face the present challenges; more precisely, they are involved".

Teachers' responses in this study, similarly to other studies (Craig *et al.*, 1998), indicate the need for forms of training directly linked to classroom practice and focussed on the practical domain. Teachers' accounts reflected the need for tangible advice on resolving day-to-day real class situations or directly related to Roma. In fact, teachers appeared to be overwhelmed by the practicalities of dealing with Roma children and suggested the need for training that would support them in managing ethnically diverse classrooms. Connecting teachers' real-world problems in dealing with multiculturalism and critical reflective thinking as Li and Lal (2005) would suggest could possibly bridge the content of such teacher training as the one examined in this paper and teachers' expectations and needs.

Teachers also appeared in need of ways to deal with bullying, reported by Roma families. Bullying and adjustment problems of Roma children in school are often reported in studies of Roma schooling. As similar problems emerge in Greek-Cypriot schools as well, teachers should be able to not only acknowledge, but also deal with such incidents. Thus, there is a need to train teachers in mechanisms and provide them with supportive measures to minimise conflicts in classrooms with Roma populations.

Conclusions

The INSETRom project acknowledged that the limited participation of Roma in the school system could be related to teachers' (mis)conceptions about the Roma culture and that the widely different ways in which Roma relate to schooling are often disregarded by the school. Initially, interest was placed on reviewing whether and how the schools set an educational opportunity for Roma children, constructing a comprehensible picture about the ways in which education was perceived by both the schools and the Roma families. Curriculum development, teacher training and intervention strategies, as these were developed as part of the project, were based on both teachers' views about educating Roma students, as well as Roma community members' perspectives on their children's schooling.

The insights gained through data presented in this paper contribute to a better understanding of what it takes to facilitate inclusive practices, enhancing the educational participation of Roma in the Greek-Cypriot educational system. More, specifically, this paper

suggests that the education of Roma children poses certain challenges to school officials and practitioners, who face the daily charge to integrate these children into schools. Teachers who participated in this training were not prepared either professionally or temperamentally to meet these challenges. Hence, the schools could perform no miracles for Roma and their children.

Teachers appeared to seek appropriate training to improve their understanding of Roma history and culture which would enable them to effectively teach in classrooms with Roma children. In fact, this study underlines the importance of training to focus more on interculturalism in our local post-modern society rather than on comparing the culture of the majority with the culture of local minorities, in this case the Roma. Intercultural dialogue, as Brie and Darabaneunu (2018, p. 124) argue, “can be successfully provided, where a community that is aware of the others comes to communicate, cooperate and build the structure of a multicultural society”. In this case, rather than resolving ethnic identity conflicts between dominant and minority groups and discrimination resulting from either the dominant or subordinated perspective (Roth *et al.*, 2013), teachers need to understand that cultures are inter-linked. By accepting and viewing humans’ historical existence from the perspective that the majority’s history is related to the minorities’ history, or the history of “Us” is related to the history of “the Other”, teachers can overcome notions of “our history” (in this case the Greek-Cypriot) and “their history” (Roma history, accordingly), because these notions, similar to metaphors of oppressions, endure over space and time. Teacher training needs to aim at helping teachers speak the “language” of “the Other”. Correspondingly, it is not only “the Others” (than the teachers’) culture that should be considered in teacher training, but also the inter-culture relating to “the Other”, as well as how humans become cultured through enculturation. These notions could address the sustainability and the transferability of future inclusive education training in terms of the underlying principles of training that are appropriate and suitable for different school contexts.

In conclusion, the inclusion strategy in the Greek-Cypriot educational system needs to become more comprehensive, to cope with varying sources of social exclusion, faced by vulnerable groups of a different cultural background, like Roma. Teacher training thus needs to meet the challenges of working in a diverse and multicultural environment in general, and with Roma children in particular [Open Society Foundations (OSF), 2011]. In view of the multicultural character of Cypriot society and the predominantly negative views about national and ethnic minorities, including Roma (Hadjitheodoulou-Loizidou and Symeou, 2007; Philippou, 2006), a more critically oriented humanistic education is needed based on tolerance and understanding. As Sandru (2015, p. 131) argues, school is the only chance for Roma children so that they do not become “the next generation of marginalised and pariah of society”.

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