Romani Students' Responses to Antigypsyist Schooling in a Segregated School in Romania

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Simina Dragos (she/her) is an ESRC-funded PhD candidate at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, UK. She grew up in Romania but moved to Cambridge in 2016 for her BA. This research draws on her undergraduate research project. In her current work, she considers the 'racial state' and seeks to engage with decolonial theoretical and methodological perspectives, thinking about colonial influences in the Eastern European periphery.

Vol. 4. No. 2. 2021, 122–140 • DOI: 10.29098/crs.v4i2.95

Abstract

In this article I explore the responses of Romani students in a segregated school in Romania to majoritarian deficit narratives constructed about them, investigating the specific nature of such deficit discourses and the specific strategies of resistance deployed by the students. To do so, I designed a theoretical framework which fused elements of Foucauldian and Critical Race Theory (CRT). The case study was underpinned by principles of in-depth critical qualitative research, explicitly addressing the racial, political and systemic nature of educational inequalities in Romania. I spent two weeks in a segregated secondary school, in which Romani students were tracked into Romani-only class groups. I observed 12 lessons and interviewed three white Romanian teachers and 11 Romani students. The findings suggested that teachers mobilized deficit discourses about Romani families, culture, cognitive abilities, and potential, reflected in their pedagogical strategies and justifications of Romani students' 'school failure'. Students resisted such assumptions through counter-storytelling, naming oppression, class disruption, and refusal of the 'rules of schooling', such as homework. I argue that this resistance highlights Romani students' critical thinking and agency. Among others, the findings indicate the need for urgent change in Romanian teacher training and educational policy.

Keywords

- Critical Race Theory
- Foucault
- Roma
- Romania
- School segregation
- Student resistance

Introduction

In 2011, the local administration of Baia Mare, Romania, built a physical wall to segregate the Romani community (Matache and Oehlke 2017). In 2019, the 'Discrimination Barometer' (Institutul National de Statistica 2019) found that 72 percent of Romanians did not trust Roma, and 29 percent would not accept a Romani person in their family. Such physical and metaphorical walls are examples of the antigypsyism that structures Romanian society.[1] In the Romanian education system, discursive and physical walls are built around children and youth, as antigypsyism is expressed through the prominence of narratives based on the 'deficits' of Romani students (Matache 2016) and through school segregation.[2]

This (educational) reality raises questions about the experiences of Romani students in segregated schools in Romania, particularly their responses to "deficit discourses" (Foley 2001, 19) and deficit-based pedagogy. I understand deficit discourses as being beliefs that Roma are culturally, linguistically, and mentally 'deficient' or 'lacking'. These are informed by white majoritarian narratives reflected on the macro-level in the structuring of the education system and on the micro-level in pedagogical practices. Consequently, this article asks the following questions: *what are the specific discourses constructed about Romani students by their teachers? In what ways, if at all, do Romani students resist the discourses constructed about them by their teachers?* To answer these questions, this article seeks to fill the following empirical and theoretical knowledge gaps: first, it addresses Romani students' experiential knowledge and responses to deficit-based schooling, while also unpacking the specific discourses mobilised by teachers; second, it combines elements of Foucauldian and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to provide a nuanced understanding of youth resistance to oppressive schooling.

This article is based on a case study at a segregated school with a majority Romani student population which streamed its Romani students into separate classrooms. I conducted classroom observations, three teacher interviews, and 11 interviews with Romani students in December 2018. The teachers constructed deficit discourses about their Romani students – these were reflected in pedagogy. The students resisted such discourses by constructing alternative discourses about themselves and by rejecting deficit-informed schooling practices. I argue that Romani students' resistance to the deficit discourses constructed about them, and to deficit-based segregated schooling, highlighted the students' critical capacities and their agency, contrary to their teachers' views of them. To make this argument, I

1 End (2012) provides a comprehensive discussion of antigypsyism. The concept is two-layered: first, antigypsyism represents a resentment manifested in discrimination and based on fictious images, beliefs, and projections of an essentialised 'Roma' figure; second, antigypsyism describes violent, historically embedded social structures, powered by whiteness and racist ideologies. These are reflected in the workings of institutions, including the education system (Rostas 2017). End (2012) does not use the term 'whiteness', but I argue that it is an appropriate concept to describe the racist power structure which enforces and reproduces antigypsyism. Ahmed (2004) explains that whiteness is a form of racial privilege which shapes spaces and realities for racialised individuals, such as Roma. It is a historically-embedded structure which reproduces processes of racialisation and white privilege. I define these concepts only briefly in a footnote because I am aware that many readers will be familiar with them already.

2 School segregation in Romania manifests in three forms: schools with a majority Romani population; overrepresentation of Roma in special schools; tracking into separate Romani-only classrooms or separation in the classroom (Greenberg 2010).

first review the literature, then present theoretical and methodological considerations, before turning to the findings and discussion.

In the spirit of CRT, my aim was to place the lived experiences of Romani students at the forefront, using an intersectional lens, though constrained by space and time. To fulfil this aim, I was guided by the paradigm of Critical Qualitative Research (CQR) (Carspecken 1996), which seeks to deconstruct inequalities and oppression in the hope for social and theoretical change. I hope that this project can contribute to the developments of a future 'RomaniCrit', a localised and contingent critical theory, and of more nuanced conceptions of youth resistance.

1. Literature Review

The reviewed literature suggests that segregated schools are underresourced (Surdu 2003; Jigou and Surdu 2007; Roth and Moisa 2011; Brüggemann 2012). Behind the segregated schooling reality, a lack of resources, and ill-prepared and temporary teachers, lies antigypsyism in the Romanian education system (Rostas 2017), evident in deficit discourses. Deficit discourses racialize Roma as 'inferior' in relation to white normativity. Unfortunately, some of the reviewed literature legitimises and normalises these discourses by giving them 'scholarly authority'.

Some scholars invoke a cultural deficit in making the argument that Roma are 'incapable' of benefiting from formal education. Walker (2010) argues that Romani students have "social and cultural conditions" (176) which leave them unprepared for school. She also argues that Romani students have "cultural needs" (Walker 2008, 400) that prevent educational success. Lukáč (2013) argues that Roma have a 'problematic' attitude towards education, which they inherit from their parents. Bhabha and colleagues (2017) claim that this idea is promoted by governments, which are perpetuating deficit discourses about Romani children.

Significantly, much of the reviewed literature lacks empirical data, instead making assumptions about the experiences of Romani students. For example, Law and Swann (2011) argue that "Schools in Central European states […] produce Roma youth who regard themselves as second-rate citizens" (165) without including accounts from Romani youth. The lack of attention to student accounts in much of the literature is also articulated by Bhabha and colleagues (2017) and Ryder (2017). Such research often employs a top-down approach, portraying Romani participants as an 'object' of research, constructing Romani youth as agency-less and voiceless – thus perpetuating epistemic violence. This type of research limits the capacity of policy to respond to the needs of segregated schooling realities and to successfully address racialised marginalisation (Ram 2015; Miskovic and Curcic 2016; Matache and Oehlke 2017).

In recent years, scholars have increasingly defied deficit discourses in their research about Romani educational experiences (see Bhabha et al. 2017; Ryder 2017; Harvard FXB and CIP Centre Belgrade 2018; Payne 2019). Nevertheless, there is a paucity of empirical research that addresses the schooling experiences of Romani students in segregated institutions in Romania. Vincze's (2014) chapter is a good example of empirical engagement with the perspectives of Romani youth in Romania, but it focuses on

ethnic identification and belonging, rather than specifically on responses to pedagogy. It does, however, set a good example of engaging with the complex and nuanced nature of the experiences and identifications of Romani youth. The documentary 'Our School' (2013) by Mona Nicoara and Miruna Coca-Cozma also showcases an avenue for foregrounding Romani students' experiences in discussions around schooling.

Overall, most of the literature around Romani school segregation focuses on policy responses, policy failure, and desegregation strategies (see for example Moisa and Shattuck 2012; Ryder, Rostas, and Taba 2014; Rostas and Kostka 2014;). Rostas' book (2012) is a comprehensive analysis of the governmental and third sector developments around school desegregation within different countries, offering the reader the opportunity "to piece together the whole puzzle" (2). While this literature brings important contributions to the discussions from policy perspectives, it rarely answers questions about the experiences of students in a segregated school or about the workings of a segregated schooling setting. To change the pedagogical reality of a segregated school, we need to know how racialised pedagogy plays out and, significantly, how students themselves perceive and respond to it.

There is no current research using CRT to unpack the realities of a segregated school in Romania. There is, however, an important contribution by Ryder, Rostas and Taba (2014) who use CRT to explain racist antigypsyist power structures which are expressed in school segregation as a form of racialised oppression. They also use counter-stories to highlight the voices and needs of communities when approaching desegregation. While the present study uses the same methodology, it focuses on agency deployment and resistance strategies of students, highlighting how CRT can be used both to deconstruct antigypsyist deficit discourses and to highlight student resistance. Another way in which CRT is used regarding school segregation is in the legal literature (see, for example, Möschel 2014; Eliason 2017). Such work argues that CRT can be applied to the European context but usually homogenises Romani experiences across Europe, treating Europe as a whole. This is not always the right approach, because marginalisation experiences are localised, with different histories of exclusion, in different socio-political, economic, and cultural landscapes.

Thus, this study fills the following empirical and theoretical gaps. First, it addresses Romani students' perspectives and responses to the realities of a segregated school, while also unpacking deficit discourses mobilised by teachers. Second, it uses CRT as a framework to amplify the experiential knowledge of Romani students. Third, it combines elements of CRT and Foucauldian theory for a nuanced understanding of youth resistance to racialised miseducation.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

First, I want to clarify my perspective on why a 'race'-based analytical grammar is helpful in this context. Miskovic (2009) argues that the meanings of 'race' emerging in North American theory have emancipatory possibilities, advocating for the disruption of a black-white binary – a critique central to Latinx Critical Theory (LatCrit) and CRT. Following this line of argument and drawing on the work of Lentin (2008) and Goldberg (2006), I support a conception of 'race' that goes beyond skin colour. Indeed, Lentin (2008) argues that racisms have always relied on a series of elements – cultural, biological, religious – beyond

phenotype. This is because race is the product of racialisation (see Ahmed 2004) – the construction of an 'inferior other' based on (in this case) ethnic identity. This racialisation occurs in relation to whiteness.

Whiteness is a form of racial privilege (Ahmed 2004) which is the result of an overarching system of domination reflected in political, economic, and social relations and structures. Whiteness presents whites as the norm and people of colour as a deviation. In the Romanian context, whiteness constructs antigypsyism (as defined earlier) which is a historically, culturally, and socially contingent type of racism; the result is a racialisation of Romani individuals and communities (for a wider discussion of anti-Romani racism in Romania, see Dorobanțu and Gheorghe 2019). If racialisation processes are not recognised, racism cannot be recognised either – this is why a 'race'-based conceptualisation is appropriate. Thus, CRT and LatCrit provided the tools to unpack the reality of a segregated school, while elements of Foucauldian theory helped me understand the processes of subject-making and the possibilities of resistance in these.

Originally a critical legal discourse, CRT was coined in the 1970s–80s in the USA. Granting importance to the experiential knowledge of racialised individuals, it exposes how liberal ideals such as colour-blindness, neutrality, objectivity, and meritocracy – all widespread in education systems – perpetuate racial oppression (Fernández 2002). CRT is a fundamentally intersectional analysis, considering the intersections between race, class, and gender (Tate 1997; Ledesma and Calderón 2015).[3] Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) adapted CRT to education, arguing that class and gender-based explanations were insufficient to account for the difference in schooling experiences and performance of Black students in the USA. CRT in education foregrounds the experiential knowledge of people of colour, seeking to counter the conceptualisation of difference as deficit (Solorzano and Yosso 2002; Gillborn and Ladson-Billings 2010; Ledesma and Calderón 2015). CRT and LatCrit counter deficit-based majoritarian narratives. Majoritarian narratives are structured by and through whiteness – and in Romania also by antigypsyism. They are populated with deficit discourses (Ledesma and Calderón 2015) which assume that ethnic minority parents are not interested in their children's education and that ethnic minority communities have deficient languages, cultures, and behaviour.

In Foucauldian terms, majoritarian narratives are part of the regime of truth shaped by whiteness. Foucauldian notions of power, truth-discourse, regimes of truth, and subjectification help understand how majoritarian narratives impact people's behaviours and beliefs, and also the possibility of resistance. Foucault argues that power is never something possessed, given, or exchanged, but something that exists in relations (Foucault 1980); majoritarian narratives are based on power differentials between groups, individuals, or institutions, in this case between Romanian teachers and Romani students, and/or the Romanian education system and Romani students. This power is productive; it produces 'truth', 'normativity', and the 'possible' (Foucault 1980), evident in truth-discourses (Foucault 1980). Several truth-discourses combined construct a regime of truth: the regime of truth comprises majoritarian narratives, while deficit discourses are truth-discourses.

3 'Intersectionality' refers to the complex effects of the intersection between multiple historically-embedded and socio-culturally situated axes of differentiation, such as social class, gender, race, or sexuality (Brah and Phoenix 2004).

Regimes of truth are significant because they determine 'the norm' and 'the possible'. To survive in society, individuals need to reproduce and embody regimes of truth (Foucault 1980). Thus, power shapes what individuals can and cannot do, be, believe or think, because regimes of truth discipline people – this is described as subjectification or subjection (Foucault 1980; Rose 1999). Subjectification describes the process of becoming subject to the regime of truth, adhering to it, and constructing an identity and behaviour in and around it. A majoritarian antigypsyist narrative, being a regime of truth, produces and reproduces whiteness as the norm and 'the deficient' Romani student as the deviant. It creates teacher-subjects and student-subjects who operate in a racist antigypsyist regime of truth framing the education system. Through subjectification, teachers and policymakers adopt and embody this specific racism, translating it into antigypsyist policy and pedagogy centred on the Romani student as deficient and failing. Conversely, Foucault explains that the truth regime disciplines, but it does not coerce: subjectification is a process of discursive reproduction, but it can also be a space for resistance through agency (Foucault 1983). An individual's actions and realm of possibility can be influenced by power only when the individual has agency: "freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power" (Foucault 1983, 790).

While this discussion of Foucauldian theoretical devices is limited and simplified, it is an important introduction to discussing less evident, subtle, student resistance: resisting subjectification. The care of the self (Foucault 1984) is a way of resisting and challenging subjectification. It involves becoming aware of the regime of truth (Dilts 2011), questioning the truth-discourses involved in one's subjectification and finding a way of living in the regime of truth. The care of the self can be performed through truth-telling, which involves labelling (racial) power relations and (deficit) discourses that shape oneself (Besley 2007). The methodology of CRT, counter-storytelling, is an act of such truth-telling, as it exposes the lived experiences of those who are silenced and racialised in the regime of truth (Delgado 1989). Engaging in counter-storytelling challenges whiteness and an antigypsyist majoritarian narrative, constituting care of the self.

I deployed an understanding of resistance rooted in these ideas. I observed that students' resisted an antigypsyist deficit-based majoritarian narrative through the care of the self, evident in counter-storytelling and truth-telling, but also through immediate and concrete responses, such as class disruption and refusal of the norms of schooling. These forms of resistance acknowledge the existence of agency in subjectification and within the oppressive, majoritarian discursive regime that shapes the realities of a segregated school.

3. Methodological Considerations

Following the theoretical considerations and the aims of the project, the most appropriate methodology was a qualitative one, with a critical research approach, inspired by Critical Qualitative Research (CQR): openly critical and political, focusing on power relations, oppression, and inequalities, the response of individuals and groups to these, seeking to challenge injustice and renegotiating social theory (see Carspecken 1996). The research design was a small-scale single exploratory case study (Yin 2003), because I aimed for an in-depth exploration of the realities of segregated schooling. Triangulation was important

for achieving in-depth analysis (Yin 2003), through a combination of different concepts, methods, and types of data.

The school, with grades one to eight (primary and middle school), was located in a small town, in a marginal neighbourhood with a majority Romani working-class community. It had a majority Romani student population but also tracked Romani students into separate class groups. I spent one day introducing myself, three days conducting classroom observations and three days conducting interviews. I chose a small sample of 11 students and three teachers, seeking to establish trust with participants (Crouch and McKenzie 2006), especially as I was an white adult stranger coming to the school.

My main data collection method was semi-structured interviews based on predefined questions, yet open enough to allow for spontaneous accounts (Flick 2014). I conducted three teacher interviews, to grasp the specific discourses constructed about Romani students. The three teachers, whom I asked to participate in the project due to their position in the school and observed interactions with Romani students, self-identified as Romanian. I interviewed the headteacher, a middle school teacher, and a primary school teacher of a Romani-only class group.

The bulk of the data came from interviewing Romani middle school students. Inspired by CRT, I wanted to give students a chance to formulate their counter-stories – the interview was the most appropriate way. I also chose interviews as opposed to focus groups, because I wanted shy students to not feel intimated and because I was aware that sensitive information might come up; I wanted to protect the confidentiality of the students but also make the interview a comfortable experience. After observing lessons and talking to students informally, I asked students in the segregated class groups if they wanted to talk to me more and be interviewed. Despite its pitfalls, such as self-selection bias of the students who were perhaps most engaged and interested in the school experience and setting, I chose this sampling strategy because I did not want to pressure students to participate, nor did I want the teachers to pressure them to participate. I ended up talking to 11 students, six boys and five girls, aged between 11 to 15. Three students self-identified as Romani-Romanian and the rest self-identified as Romani.

Following the principles of CRT and CQR, I wanted to position the students as experts – I tried to be what Holstein and Gubrium (2002) describe as "active interviewer" (112), facilitating the participants' exploration of their schooling experiences. This is much easier said than done when working with adolescents with whom I did not have much time to connect and did not share an ethnic or class background. Yet, I had noticed during classes that the students enjoyed drawing, so I asked them to draw their houses and neighbourhoods at the beginning of each interview, if they so wanted. I used the drawings as elicitation devices and also to address the power imbalance of the interview setting. Drawing allowed students to avoid eye contact if they wanted, take speaking breaks and hopefully made the experience more enjoyable.

To achieve an in-depth analysis, I also observed twelve lessons, focusing on teacher-student interactions and the specific discourses and pedagogical strategies emerging. I was a non-participant observer (Creswell 2014), sitting at the back of the classroom, taking notes without being involved in class activities. Wragg (1999) highlights the importance of non-verbal behaviour in classroom observations – I focused

on instances of verbal or physical violence, racism, class disruption, and disciplinary measures. I also kept a fieldwork diary, in which I recorded the informal conversations I had with teachers and students during breaks, and also the data collection process. This diary proved useful in navigating my reflections and positionality during the writing process.

After I transcribed the recorded interviews, I used a three-stage thematic analysis approach (see Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010; Flick 2014), broadly drawing on the coding strategies of Grounded Theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. First, in the open coding stage (Flick 2014), I immersed myself into the text, systematically noting down in a table the categories (e.g. 'linguistic barriers') that emerged. Second, in the axial coding stage (Flick 2014), I related the categories to each other, looking for relationship between and within categories, thus establishing codes. I established the codes based on the prominence in significance and frequency of the categories. Finally, further reading the transcripts and triangulating with observational and diary data, I selected themes and constructed narratives in the selective coding stage (Flick 2014). I selected separate themes from the teacher data (deficient families, deficient culture, intellectual inability, students as failing adults) and the student data (internationalisation of the deficit narrative, the Romani counter-story, truth-telling as resistance, disruption as resistance, refusal as resistance, and intersectional oppression). Sections 4 and 5 reflect these themes.

This research design had particular limitations. First, the findings cannot be generalised. Second, the limited timeframe did not allow me to grasp whether student resistance was a continuous reality or prompted by my presence. I was also unable to engage with the community beyond the school due to time constraints. Another significant limitation was that I did not speak Romani. The students had to speak Romanian, which often was not their first language. Some meaning might be lost in translation, especially as I did the analysis in English. Overall, I could have adopted a more participatory approach, which would have been more empowering for students.

4. A White Majoritarian Narrative

These segregated class groups studied in classrooms filled with posters about Romanian history and Romanian national holidays, in a language that is their second if not third, about a culture that actively makes them invisible. This was a visceral reminder of the phrase "Historically the school is the institution of another culture" (O'Hanlon and Holmes 2004, 15). I soon understood that whiteness-informed majoritarian narratives dominated the schooling site and practices, most evident in racializing deficit discourses about Romani families, culture, cognitive abilities, and future potential, mobilized by teachers.

I spent most of the breaks in the teachers' room, talking to teachers, trying to understand the discourses they used in the construction of Romani student-subjects. They were quick to tell me that the main barrier to the students' educational achievement was their families, which they described as 'problem families'. The teachers argued that Romani parents did not care about their children's education, operating on the assumption that Romani parents neglected their children and that the family environments were not conducive to formal education. They claimed that students had behavioural issues because of their parents and that they had "*deficient emotional baggage*", which they saw as barriers to educational achievement.

The teachers viewed the family environment as problematic because it is the site of socialisation into Romani culture. The school's mission was understood to be one of assimilation – to help the Romani students become 'less' Roma and 'more' Romanian. Aiming to assimilate Romani students, the teachers revealed the belief that, for a student to be successful, a student needed to act 'Romanian':

> *Roma students[…] in comparison with Romanian students, are their exact opposite. They don't have the ambition that Romanian students have […]But the* Romanianized *Roma students become like Romanians and want to be their equals.*

These beliefs are informed by an antigypsyist regime of truth and reflected in a racialisation of Romani students as mentally unable. They also influenced the teachers' subjectification and behaviour, including a deficit-based pedagogy. During a break, I overheard a conversation in which a teacher told another teacher to go to class. That teacher responded, *"What am I meant to do with them for a whole hour?"*, implying that there was nothing she could teach Romani students for the whole hour because they had limited abilities. Similarly, a teacher threatened to give a student a 'two' (out of ten), adding *"you wouldn't get any more if I gave you a test either"*. Teachers often told me that Romani students were 'stupid', 'weak', or 'mentally disabled'. During a lesson with a segregated class group, the teacher interrupted the lesson, came to where I was sitting, and said – aloud, with all students present – that most students in that class group were mentally disabled and she was happy if they *"didn't take each other's eyes out"*. The low expectations and deficit-based pedagogy also shaped teachers' views of their students' future, implicitly also the career advice, encouragement, or support they gave their students:

> I: And what do you think these children will do professionally?
> *R: Nothing. From my perspective, nothing. Or some of them, who fend for themselves, will end up working in factories, but the majority will be on social benefits […] I don't see these students as doctors, teachers, or civil servants. No way.*

These violent ideology and practices reflect the teachers' subjectification into a racist regime of truth that shapes Romanian society and, implicitly, the education system. In articulating the perceived lack of possibilities and success for her students, the teacher lays bare the systemic racism which sets multiple and consecutive barriers to Romani youth from the first day of school, when their teachers label them as deficient students whose identities are incompatible with academic achievement. This expression of systemic anti-Roma racism occurs elsewhere, too (see Bhabha et al. 2017; Payne 2019), but such deficit-discourses also proliferate in the US American context against Black and Latinx students (Delgado Bernal 2002; Fernandez 2002; Castro-Salazar and Bagley 2010; Martínez 2017), indicating that – while local complexities and manifestation are important to unpack – white supremacy is a transnational structure.

5. Student Responses to Miseducation

Reproducing the Deficit Narrative

It was important to unpack these deficit discourses, but the focus should be the experiential knowledge of the students and their resistance strategies. Being in the school daily for many years, living in an anti-

Romani racist society, it is unsurprising that some students mirrored the deficit discourses put forward by teachers. For example, four students argued that Romanians were better students because they were "nicer" and "more civilised". One student explained that this was knowledge she had learned from school, pointing to the subjectification performed in an antigypsyist schooling setting, highlighting how the state teaches whiteness through schooling:

> *I: What did you learn [at school] about Roma?*
> *R: Roma are not exactly like Romanians […] Romanians are not really like that to say mean things amongst peers […] Roma are crazy, because they say stupid things.*

The subjectification to a racist regime of truth does not, however, diminish the potential for resistance. It seemed that students resisted through telling counter-stories about themselves, their potential, and their community, through naming oppression, and through class disruption and refusal of the rules of schooling.

The Romani Counter-story: Good Students, Strong Communities, and Counter-possibilities
Romani students resisted the regime of truth, and their subjectification to it, by telling counter-stories about themselves and their educational interests, their aspirations and their community. Although teachers claimed that the students and their community did not care about education, all students described themselves as good students, reclaiming schooling and its aims. They defined being a 'good student' not just in academic terms but holistically, invoking the kindness and friendship of their peers. This, in itself, is a counter-story to a majoritarian narrative of educational success. Moreover, they described schooling as a tool to obtain a job and driving licence or to avoid being exploited, re-negotiating the aims of education. A student explained how schooling could help her protect herself from the exploitation her father experienced being a factory worker, which she tied to his lack of schooling. The student created a counter-story about the aim of education, using the tool of whiteness – the school – to protect herself against the abuse of racist society. This highlights how formulating counter-stories can be seen as the care of the self, which is resistance with the purpose of creating a way of living within society.

Furthermore, the students articulated counter-possibilities (Martínez 2017) directly challenging their teachers' low expectations of them. Ten students indicated that they wanted to attend high school and over half of them mentioned wanting to go to university. Most students described specific professional plans and aspirations, thus creating counter-possibilities to the futures the teachers projected for them. Such counter-possibilities enunciated by middle school students were also observed by Martínez (2017) relating to Chicano/a and Latinx students in the USA. Additionally, the students constructed counter-stories about their communities: they saw their communities as spaces of support, and they planned their futures around giving back and supporting the vulnerable in their local community. I also asked all students who their role models were – nine mentioned family and community members, invoking kindness and strength. Community was important in educational achievement and in constructing counter-stories for students of colour in the USA, too (see Delgado Bernal 2002; Fernandez 2002; Castro-Salazar and Bagley 2010; Martínez 2017), showing the links between racialised oppression in different contexts. These counter-possibilities, and counter-narratives about their neighbourhood, pointed to a Romani subject constructed outside a majoritarian narrative, which challenges a regime of truth.

Truth-telling as Resistance

In acts of truth-telling, students named the inadequacy of their schooling, critiquing insufficient and unfairly distributed resources, teacher violence, and deficit-based pedagogy. Having experienced education abroad,[4] some students were aware of how under-resourced their school was and also felt that they were disadvantaged in comparison to Romanian students: *"Sometimes we say 'oh [Romanian-only class group] got such a beautiful classroom and we got what was left over because we are Roma'. And that's the thing and […] it's true."* Students were aware of racialised differentiation, which indicates awareness of, and a challenge to, antigypsyism – an act of care of the self.

The students also described the school as being a physically and symbolically violent environment. Several students mentioned that they, or their peers, had been physically assaulted by a teacher. Some students also explicitly addressed racism in the school. Two students mentioned racist behaviour of Romanian students:

> *I: If you imagine a perfect school, what would that school be like?*
> *R: It would be nicer […] because [Romanians] protect themselves from Roma, they say that Roma have something, that they are ugly and whatever […] they [Romanians] keep swearing at us when we go to [computer room] […] but no one says anything about them.*
> *Calling out injustice, the students showed a critical awareness of anti-Romani racism in their school. This critique is an act of the care of the self and of resistance to a majoritarian narrative framing their schooling.*

Refusing Miseducation, Resisting Deficit-based Pedagogy

Students also actively disrupted classroom settings in which they had little agency or were not listened to. When teachers allowed them to actively participate and not sit in their restrictive rows, they engaged in class. In my interpretation, it indicated that students were disruptive to actively resist classroom settings they found oppressive. Another tactic of resistance was speaking Romani during class. Students told me that they did this to complain to each other about the teacher and also to tell each other the correct answer when assessed. This was perceived negatively by Romanian teachers, who tried to prohibit it. However, the students found everyday strategies to resist the deficit-based, disengaging schooling experience that renders them invisible. Thus, they claimed space and challenged practices and norms based on antigypsyism. Fernandez (2002) explains that Latinx students in the USA had a similar practice of refusal, cutting class or engaging in other activities when they found their schooling oppressive.

Four students also mentioned that they did not do homework for lessons taught by teachers who were violent, using their power over their homework to refuse the conditions of violent schooling:

> *To me … easy … easy is Maths, Romanian, History, I study for these three subjects. But I don't study for Biology and Geography. […] I don't study because […] the Geography teacher is mean, once, yesterday, he hit [student]. […] Because he says that we* are stupid, like those people, handicapped, that we don't know how to write [author's emphasis].

4 Some students in the sample had lived abroad with their parents. Their inclusion in the sample was arbitrary.

This response reflected an awareness of deficit discourses and that these underpinned the teacher's violence. Revealing this in the interview was an act of truth-telling, naming oppression, and refusing the homework represented resistance.

These captured instances show students' agency and intervention into their own subjectification to a white truth regime, a majoritarian narrative. Through practices of care of the self – naming oppression, refusing homework, speaking Romani, constructing counter-stories – the students showed a range of resistance tactics to racialised oppression. Contrary to teachers' beliefs, these students were active agents in their education, with a sharp critical awareness of deficit discourses. However, we should not exoticize their resistance – these students have the right to a fulfilling educational experience. They should be able to enjoy learning opportunities and not have to resist a physically and symbolically violent environment in order to survive. Their resilience is a sign of an education system shaped by anti-Roma racism, which sets multiple barriers to the achievement of Romani students, not least physical violence and a fundamental expectation of failure.

Intersectional Oppression
Sexual violence (sexual harassment and sexual assault) was brought up by a student without me asking. She reported feeling unsafe, learning from the experiences of her sister:

> *R: Mum doesn't want to leave me at this school, because, first, I had a sister in the 'second chance' programme and then a boy picked on her. He wanted to rape her and then my sister never wanted to come again [to school]. And then the headteacher said that no, it's not true and mum said that she's not gonna leave me for much longer either.*
> *I: Have you told your class teacher? That you're scared?*
> *R: I told her many times…*
> *I: She doesn't believe you?*
> *R: No. So, us, from our class group, no one believes us.*

Being Roma and being a teenage girl intersected in silencing the experiences of this student and her sister. She might miss out on the opportunities of schooling because her parents must protect her immediate physical safety. The teachers disregarding her feelings of unsafety and discomfort in the school sent her the message that her safety and concerns did not matter, that she was disposable. Yet, this was one of the most outspoken students who used her agency to challenge injustice at all times. Her premature resilience and awareness of threats is a reminder of the ways Romanian society constantly fails Romani women and girls.

6. Reflections

Theoretical Developments
Although CRT provides valuable insights into racialised oppression, deficit-based discourses and counter-storytelling, CRT is embedded in the context of the USA. I hope that this project can contribute to developments toward a 'RomaniCrit' – something Matache and Oehlke (2017) call for – which would address the unique history and situated struggles of Romani communities in Romania, producing knowledge with and for Romani communities.

Furthermore, the combination of elements of Foucauldian theory with CRT could prompt developments in educational theory toward more nuanced understandings of students' resistance strategies. Students' perceived disruptive behaviour should also be understood as deployment of agency in relation to inadequate schooling. Yet we need theories that recognise student agency even when it is performed in subtle ways, such as through storytelling. Perhaps more interdisciplinary and participatory approaches are a solution, inspired by principles of participatory action research or ethnographic research, or fields such as children's geographies.

Ethical Implications and Reflexivity

Discussing ethical implications in a small number of words, without transforming them into an afterthought or a performative aspect of research, is challenging. The project received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge, and I obtained Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks in the UK and in Romania. I received written consent from teachers for their interviews, and from students and their parents or guardians for the interviews with students. However, a genuine discussion about research ethics with marginalised youth is more complicated than that. While I did ensure full anonymity and confidentiality, I could not help but wonder whether some students might have wanted me to take action upon telling me how they had been mistreated. I decided against reporting the violence because I was concerned that the teachers would punish the students after I left. Furthermore, negotiating consent beyond forms was challenging, especially describing it to teenagers who were entering an imbalanced power relation; I was limited by my lack of Romani skills and of contact with the students' parents. Perhaps, further discussions around the complexity of achieving truly ethical research should be had in training educational researchers.

Questions of ethics are also inextricably connected to researcher reflexivity. Indeed, Silverman (2018) argues that reflexivity is mandatory for non-Romani researchers, like myself, given our historical power over knowledge-production. This is particularly true when working with young people – the distance between myself and the participants was mediated by age, class, gender, and whiteness. However, thinking through an insider-outsider binary seems unhelpful because it essentialises and homogenises the identities of participants, describing both mine and the participants' identities as static, when identities are fluid and shifting. Thinking insider-outsider relations as a continuum, as Fremlova (2018) suggests, seems more useful in explaining researcher-participant dynamics, as some experiences bring us closer to that of our participants'. For me, this was my experience of sexual assault. When the student told me that she was afraid of sexual violence in the school, I felt unable to respond. The male headteacher had already invalidated her and her sister's fears, and, by extension, mine as well, which left me feeling powerless.

Understanding identities as shifting but being mindful of my positionality meant not claiming to explain what it means to be Roma in a segregated school but rather pointing to discourses and constructed realities. My hope is to contribute to knowledge on anti-Roma racism, and to challenge dominant discourses about Romani adolescents as inert or lacking agency.

Conclusion

Returning to the research questions outlined in the introduction, Romani students in this segregated school did reject and resist the white majoritarian deficit narratives constructed about them, though some internalised some deficit discourses. Romanian teachers mobilized deficit discourses about Romani families, communities, culture, cognitive abilities, and future potential, which was reflected in their antigypsyist pedagogy. Students resisted these discourses and the oppressive schooling through counter-storytelling, naming their oppression, disrupting classes, and refusing homework as protest. Thus, I argued that the students' resistance to the deficit discourses constructed about them and to segregated schooling highlighted the students' critical capacities and their agency, contrary to how the teachers portrayed them. The students were miseducated and treated below their potential, which only proves the role education can play in reproducing inequalities.

I hope that this case study can be one of many highlighting Romani students' agency and critical capacities, and the ways in which the education system fails them, actively preventing them from achieving academic success. Similar research involving a larger sample could generate more generalisable findings and potentially influence national policy. On a theoretical level, I hope that the combination of CRT with Foucauldian theory can elicit more nuanced conceptualisations of youth resistance and agency deployment. I finish with the hope to see a future 'RomaniCrit', a theory contingent on the histories and localised experiences of Romani communities in Romania, building on recent theoretical endeavours (see Dorobanțu and Gheorghe 2019).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my undergraduate research project supervisor, Dr Peter Sutoris, for his guidance, patience, and dedication. Without his help, this work would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my dear colleagues, particularly Will, George, and Hannah, who read versions of this work and provided invaluable feedback. Last but not least, I would like to thank the two peer reviewers for their comments, and Dr Marton Rovid and Jonathan McCombs for their editorial guidance and kindness throughout the publication process.

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