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Prejudice and need for relatedness expressed in the narratives of Finnish Roma early school leavers: A multi-case study

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Abstract

School discontinuation in Finland is more common among the Finnish Roma than among the population as a whole. We lack knowledge of the perspective of those of the Roma, representing a minority inside a minority, who have left compulsory school without a leaving certificate. Within a study about school experiences of imprisoned early school leavers in Finland we had six participants with a Finnish Roma background, whose experiences of relatedness, and frustration of it, we examine in this paper. We conducted narrative interviews with the participants, applying a co-operative narrative interpretation to the meanings of what was told. After the field process, we interpreted the narrative accounts focusing on experiences of relatedness, and how relationships with people in the school environment affected the participants' sense of belonging together with the people in the school environment. Frustration of relatedness was identified at three levels. Firstly, at a general, life condition level, cultural prejudice manifested itself as a sense of not being accepted and respected as an equal with other people, the situation creating a constant need to cope with outspoken prejudices. Secondly, at a contextual-specific level in the school environment, we identified experiences of being rejected by peers and their parents, as well as some of the teachers. This was linked with a sense of loneliness and detachment from other people in the school environment. Thirdly, at a situational level, the participants described both positive relationships, such as momentary friendships, and negative experiences of being excluded from the peer group. Pathways for further inquiries are discussed.

Keywords Prejudice · Early school leaving · Finnish Roma · Relatedness · Need frustration · Self Determination Theory

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1 Introduction

The factors underpinning early school leaving among the Finnish Roma, as well as outcomes of short educational careers, are issues which need closer examination than currently available in research literature. The present study highlights individual experiences and perspectives of Finnish Roma early school leavers. The traditional stigmatizing story of the Roma as non-educated, exotic travellers and thieves, as a rejected people through their own fault, has a long history. Although there has been an ongoing process of change in recent years, both in Finland and elsewhere in Europe (Friman-Korpela, 2014; Matache, 2017, 2018; European Commission, 2019), and even though the law in Finland and in many other countries restrains institutional racism, cultural racism as a negative generalisation of a group still exists and keeps prejudices alive, targeting the Finnish Roma among other minorities, as Berlin (2015a) has noted. Furthermore, Helakorpi et al. (2018) noted that the Finnish national policy of improving the social positioning of people identifying themselves as Finnish Roma tends to focus on problem representations, such as the lack of educational background of Finnish Roma parents. This is in line with Lauritzen and Nodeland (2018), who identified several problem representations in European research literature on education and Roma. Additionally, Miskovic and Curcic (2016) noted that there are discrepancies between what is meant by the inclusion of Roma students and how inclusion is implemented at a practical level. To learn more about different perspectives linked with educational trajectories and the school careers of the Finnish Roma we have, as part of a larger study about early school leaving in Finland (Pikkarainen et al., 2021), interviewed six people who identified themselves as Finnish Roma and had left comprehensive school without graduating. The present study gives voice to these Finnish Roma early school leavers themselves by positioning the participants as subjects in the research design and by valuing their lived experience as an important source of information.

The research body of Finnish Roma includes ethnicity (Markkanen, 2003), identity (Roman, 2018), power relations (Berlin, 2015a, 2015b; Stenroos, 2019), and policy (Friman-Korpela, 2014; Helakorpi et al., 2018; Stenroos, 2020), as well as school practices and coping strategies (Helakorpi et al., 2019). However, much less is known about the perspective and experiences of Finnish Roma who have left school before graduating. When we started to examine school experiences of imprisoned early school leavers in Finland, several participants from a Finnish Roma background volunteered, willing to share their experiences (Pikkarainen et al., 2021, 2022). To expand our knowledge about obstacles faced by Finnish Roma in the school environment, and to be able to tackle those obstacles more effectively, we need to learn about lived experiences of the people themselves. Furthermore, it's important to include in our study both those experiences of the process of leaving school that the participants describe as intertwined with their cultural background and experiences they described to be of a more general nature. Experiences of individual people can formulate counter-stories to question cultural prejudice and provide perspectives for a better understanding of the elements that affect the school leaving processes in general as well as among people who belong to a minority.

It's important to notice that the Finnish Roma are not a homogenous group, but consists of individuals and families, some following cultural habits such as traditional clothing and symbolic purity more strictly than others (Roman, 2018; Stenroos, 2012, 2019; Viljanen, 2012). A child born into a Finnish Roma family learns the habits of their family, adapting ways to cope with the surrounding society, as well as with the power relations between families inside the community of Finnish Roma, and sometimes obligations to avoid another Finnish Roma family (Berlin. 2015b); Stenroos (2019); Viljanen, 2012); The Finnish Roma families live in the midst of varying coping strategies. Some individuals are labelled by other Roma families as members of bad families, whose presence is not supported, and from whose influence other Roma families protect their better reputation among majority people (Roman, 2018; Vähemmistövaltuutettu, 2014). As an instrument to control in which areas of the country a Finnish Roma family lives, a moving permit custom is applied, within which the authority to support or thwart a Finnish Roma person to move to a new city is in the hands of elder members of the family lines already living in the area (Berlin, 2015b; Stenroos, 2019). As Stenroos (2019) has pointed out, that affects an individual's possibilities to participate in social activities, including education. Berlin (2015b) noted that the aim of the moving permit custom is to prevent conflicts between Finnish Roma families with a history of feuding, which has been described by Grönfors (1977). Accordingly, Stenroos (2019) pointed out, that the avoidance custom between conflicted families and the members of the families provides a way to show respect to the offended party. The avoidance duty and practices related to it affect all life domains and all Finnish Roma individuals and families at least at a level of awareness of the custom and if necessary avoiding someone, knowing who to avoid and acting accordingly (Berlin, 2015b; Roman, 2018; Stenroos, 2019).

In a national context, Lehti (2019) reported, that male Finnish Roma appeared as victims of homicide ten times more often than males of the population as a whole. Additionally, Weiste-Paakkanen et al. (2018) noted in a survey that approximately 40 % of Roma people reported that they avoid certain places because of feeling unsafe. Furthermore, Junkala and Tawah (2009) brought forth Roma youth's experiences of their family being followed by shop guards in an inappropriate way, as well as a sense of insecurity of being accepted when starting school. This may indicate an increased possibility for Finnish Roma families and their children to experience a threat of physical or mental violence, compared to the population as a whole. In cases when other risk factors, such as problems in parental care and poverty accumulate, the situation can decrease the sense of security in the developmental environment of the children.

Statistics by ethnicity about Finnish Roma are not available in Finland (Nieminen, 2013) due to European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR.eu, n.d.) followed by Finnish data protection instructions (Processing of Special Categories of Personal Data, n.d.) which prohibit creating statistics drawn from ethnic information. However, reports reveal shortcomings within education, for instance a lower level of school-continuation compared to the population as a whole and miss-matches in special-class placements of Finnish Roma students (Rajala & Blomerus, 2015; Rajala et al., 2011). While the percentage of young people having left

comprehensive school without a leaving certificate was 0,75 % among the population as a whole, equalling 436 students (Official Statistics of Finland OSF, 2019), around 80 % of students from a Finnish Roma background have completed compulsory schooling (Opetushallitus, 2016; ROMPO, 2019, 25). On the other hand, the Finnish Roma have been active and influential in developing policy, at both a national and European level (Friman-Korpela, 2014; Roman, 2020). Furthermore, there have been successful academic careers among people representing Roma background in several countries, for instance in Germany, (Hofmann & Óhidy, 2018) Hungary (Óhidy, 2020), Greece (Gkofa, 2017), and Spain (Gómez-González et al., 2022). Stenroos and Helakorpi (2021) highlighted that there are several kinds of educational careers and school transitions among the Finnish Roma. In Finland, Friman-Korpela and Stenroos, are researchers publicly representing the Finnish Roma have published doctoral dissertations (Friman-Korpela, 2014; Stenroos, 2020; Vuorela, 2014), and students coming from a Finnish Roma background have graduated with other kinds of thesis, such as in polytechnic studies (Ärling, 2010; Nyman, 2012).

Although the educational situation has been improving, there has also emerged a polarization among the Finnish Roma, following the tendency among the society as a whole, through accumulating obstacles and social ill-being in some of the families (Vähemmistövaltuutettu, 2014). Adding to this, Weiste-Paakkanen et al. (2018) reported lower rates of employment among the Finnish Roma compared to the population as a whole.

The Finnish Roma have tended to start a family rather young compared to the population as a whole: female Finnish Roma participants of a recent survey by Weiste-Paakkanen et al. (2018) had had their first child at the average age of 20.1 years, while the average rate among the populations was between 29 and 30 years (SVT, 2018). This may indicate discontinuation in the mother's educational career, affecting the children's schooling as well. However, according to a recent study by Ferreira et al (2021), a Roma minority background did no't affect how children and families responded to an educational intervention. On the contrary, Ferreira et al (2021) found, that low-income majority families and low-income Roma families responded similarly to a pre-school intervention of shared reading. In line with this, Pikkarainen et al. (2022) suggested that detachment from school as a society was a shared element in processes behind early school leaving regardless of cultural or familial background. As another non-cultural factor Virtanen and Tuomo (2016) pointed out that positive emotional engagement in teacher-student relationships played an important role in students' school engagement in the Finnish context. Moreover, Vinciguerra et al. (2021) highlighted that a lack of socio-emotional support made students prone to dropping out of school. In line with this, Äärelä (2012) found when examining school experiences of young prisoners, that the quality of relationships with school adults had been identified as an important element of school engagement, as well as school disengagement. In the processes of leaving school in the research sample of Äärelä (2012), which consisted of 29 interviewees, out of whom 28 had left school before graduating, positive experiences related to school disappeared while the narratives proceeded from the first school years towards secondary education. Considering the Finnish population as a whole,

accumulating family disadvantages, such as parental school dropout, familial need for social assistance, and parents' unemployment had a negative impact on the children's school career (Vauhkonen et al., 2017). It's important to note, that these kinds of risk elements may occur in families representing a national majority as well as in families representing a minority. However, we lack knowledge on whether and how accumulation of these psychosocial risk elements has a stronger impact on children's wellbeing and schooling in families representing minorities than in families without negative labelling. Furthermore, Roman (2020) noted that improvements in social and the economic wellbeing of Finnish Roma families had a positive impact on discourses about the future of Finnish Roma children, and consequently on the community, which also is a tendency not bound to a cultural or familial background. Drawn from this, it remains unclear, how aspects linked with a cultural background, such as cultural prejudice, and non-culturally bound aspects, such as socio-economic issues accumulate, are intertwined, or affect separately students' school trajectories. This highlights the importance to also study the experiences of Roma students from a perspective of shared human experiences, regardless of the cultural background, in addition to focusing on ethnic and cultural aspects.

As theoretical framework, we chose a sub-theory of Self Determination Theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2020), the theory of three basic psychological needs, namely competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Inside this framework, we are especially interested in frustration of relatedness due to need thwarting and lack of need support, while also considering participants' positive experiences (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). To capture and manage the richness of storied experiences, we have chosen to use the concept of these three needs as an organizing tool for the narrative data.

Virtanen and Tuomo (2016) and Tvedt et al. (2021) point out that positive emotional engagement in teacher-student relationships played an important role in students' school engagement in the Finnish context. Furthermore, loneliness and a sense of not being accepted as an equal has been found to indicate diminishing engagement in school activities (Costa et al, 2014; Fandrem et al, 2021; Haugan et al., 2019; Morin, 2020; Umlauft & Dalbert, 2017). Additionally, highlighting the crucial role of teachers within the school context, Beißert et al. (2021), Cavendish (2013), Cousik (2015), and Jussim and Harber (2005) point out that teachers' attitudes and expectations tend to have an impact on the students' achievement. Hence, a sense of relatedness with peers and adults within the school context can either promote or hinder a student's engagement. In this study, we are focusing on experiences of relatedness brought forth in narrative interviews with Finnish Roma early school leavers.

SDT claims to be relevant in different cultures and life settings, including education (Chen et al., 2015; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and postulates that each child is born with basic psychological needs. How these needs are fulfilled is crucial for healthy development and well-being, including a successful path in school, whereas a thwarting of the needs leads to experiences of frustration, diminishing motivation and illbeing, which in the school context manifests itself as school refusal and school-absenteeism (Deci & Ryan, 2008, 2012; Filippello et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2013). Following the conceptualising of

Vansteenkiste and et al. (2020), we understand by relatedness a sense of belonging together and connected with other people and different groups of people.

Experiences of need support or thwarting can be of a general, domain-specific, or situational nature (Vallerand & Ratelle, 2002). For instance, in the case of a child, weak parental care would represent the general level, a life condition; while peer group relationships in school would represent the domain-specific level, and incidents and interactions within these relationships the situational level. Furthermore, trust in support for psychological needs has been noted as an important element in healthy development (Ryan & Deci, 2009). Additionally, past experiences have an impact on responses to need perceptions (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

Drawing from the literature, we presuppose that cultural racism and perceived threat of psychological safety, representing general-level factors in relation to satisfaction of the need for relatedness, affect contextual elements in the school environment, and further the situational experiences of individual students. As not being motivated to go to school, the participants can be assumed to have experienced thwarting of the need for relatedness in the school context.

In the present study we aim to find out what kind of experiences of relatedness, accumulating need frustration as members of a stigmatized group, and as a minority inside a minority, do the participants identify as significant in their process of early school leaving. We also investigate, what kind of meanings do the participants give to their positive experiences of relatedness.

2 Methodological and ethical commitments of the study

In this study we have chosen to apply the theoretical framework of SDT in organising and interpreting narrative data, in line with Ryan and Deci (2020), as they encourage qualitative studies to enrich the research body of SDT. We comprehend lived experience as a rich source of information, a continuum, shaped by telling, reflecting and new experiences, as conceptualized by Dewey (1938), Bruner (2004) and Clandinin (2013). Narrative, that is, storied experience, is understood in this study as a subjective, contextual window for learning about phenomena, which participants identify as important in their life situation (Pikkarainen et al., 2019, 2021, 2022). Clandinin (2013) claims, that individual narratives should be seen and understood through larger, contextual narratives that affect society, and the individuals living in it. The generality levels drawn from SDT in the present study resonate with these elements of narrative landscape, by providing contextual background to the individual stories of the participants.

As Clandinin et al. (2018) have stated, narrative inquiry, being based on personal experience and interaction between the researcher and the participant, is an ethical act from beginning to end. To avoid causing any harm to the participants, we found it crucial to engage in the ethics of respect and confidentiality as suggested by Josselson (2007). The context and situational aspects of the meeting, as well as the backgrounds of the participant and the interviewer, and what they represent to each other, have an impact on the interaction between them, and hence also on what is told (Lessard et al., 2018). Furthermore, interviewing participants

who are positioned as a minority in society calls for careful consideration of power relationships (Josselson, 2007). As Fremlova (2018) points out, the researcher needs to reflect her own privilege and positionality. Hence, we found it important to emphasize the expertise of the interviewee, and underline that the interviewer, as a non-Roma, was there to learn. Additionally, we chose a theoretical framework that provides a perspective shared with all humans, that of basic psychological needs, instead of highlighting cultural differences. Furthermore, Tomasetto and Appoloni (2013) noted that merely presenting evidence on a stereotype threat, without a presence of supporting interventions, may harm the targets of a stigma. Though the present study is not a part of any intervention study as itself, it is in line with a strong body of ongoing national projects aiming to promote equality and participation of the Finnish Roma in the local society, as well as improving Roma access to all forms and levels of education (ROMPO, 2019).

Prison as an environment where people are separated from their daily activities, provided a relatively stable space for research interviews, as well as mental space for remembering, telling, and reflecting for the subjects (Granfelt, 2017). The first author, who also conducted the research interviews, has a background in teaching. In this study, she aimed to provide an invitation to talk about school experiences the participants would find important to be heard by a representative of school as an institute (PIkkarainen et al., 2019, 2021, 2022).

3 Participants, interviews, and data management

The participant group of the study is part of a larger study carried out between November 2015 and June 2017, in which narrative data was collected among imprisoned Finnish early school leavers (Pikkarainen et al., 2019, 2021, 2022). As described by Pikkarainen et al. (2019, 2021), the participants were recruited by providing an information leaflet about the study for potential Finnish speaking participants, in collaboration with contact persons named by prison directors. Seven out of the 14 volunteered participants described themselves as Finnish Roma. They are the informants of this paper. The age of the Finnish Roma participants varied from 20–40 years, at the time of the interviews (2016). Four of them had experienced child-care interventions in their childhood or youth, and two of them described their families as low-income families. All the Finnish Roma participants had left school during comprehensive education. It is notable, that the participants do not represent Finnish Roma people in general but came from a sub-group within the cultural minority, being under custody and having left school without graduating, as well as experiencing child-care interventions, among other things. To widen our perspective, and to enhance understanding of cultural issues, we also interviewed four specialists, working either in the field of prison education, project workers, or as school-assistants. Two of the specialists identified themselves as Finnish Roma, two of them represented the white Finnish majority, having 5–20 years background in the field.

Permission for research interviews was granted by the Finnish Ministry of Justice, and the research procedures followed the guidelines of the Ethical Committee

of Jyväskylä University. All participants signed an informed consent after having received written and verbal information about the study from the contact person and the interviewer. Anonymization and data management was carried out as described by Pikkarainen et al. (2019, 2021). With each participant we carried out three interview meetings, which took place within three months for each participant. The specialists were met in an interview only once, as were two of the participants, due to changes in the participants' prison sentence and placement, as ordered by the prison administration. The cooperative narrative interviewing processes and descriptions of the participants have been described in more detail by Pikkarainen et al. (2021). Data analysis started during the co-operative interview process, when the interviewer discussed with the participants about the issues and meanings brought forth by them. During further interpretation we coded issues of positive and negative experiences of interaction with peers, school personnel and people outside the school environment, as well as perceived prejudices, using ATLAS.ti 7.

4 Findings

In this section we provide quotes from the interviews and issues brought forth in the narrative accounts about the experiences of the participants and their own children. When quoting the participants in the research text the translation follows the wording used by the participants as strictly as possible. When a participant used the spoken language word "mustalainen" it has been translated as "Gypsy", and accordingly, when the more official word "romani" was used by a participant, it has been translated as "Roma". We start the section with the interviewed specialists and continue with the actual participants of the study.

4.1 Cultural prejudice described by school assistance personnel

The interviewed specialists highlighted the prejudice that Finnish Roma perceive at a general level. To illustrate the situation, Rainer, a school assistant, who came from a Finnish Roma background, talked about his family:

> When my son (age 6) starts a new hobby, I make my non-Roma wife take him there a couple of times first. When he has established himself as 'Tom', I can take him there myself. By then he will not anymore become 'Tom the Romani boy' but he will stay as 'Tom' whose dad happens to come from Roma background.

According to Rainer, the children of Finnish Roma families learn before school age, that they belong to a group that differs from other people in some way. When entering the school environment, Rainer said, the children of Finnish Roma families already know that prejudice exists. About his position in school, as an adult coming from Finnish Roma background, Rainer explained: "When there is a Roma person among the school staff, representing the same values as the child, it creates a sense of security, or safety for the child".

We also interviewed a project worker-pair, one of whom represented the Finnish Roma background and the other the Finnish majority. Based on their experience, many Finnish Roma tend to think poorly of their abilities. In addition to that, the Finnish Roma project worker explained that difficulties in getting trainee-posts during schooling also discourages Finnish Roma students, as does knowing about the difficulties of other Finnish Roma in integrating into the labour market.

4.2 Cultural prejudice shaping the peer relationships of the participants

Cultural prejudice manifested itself in the school context in multiple ways, varying from a negative atmosphere to straightforward rejection based on cultural background. The need to cope with prejudice was imminent in the narrative accounts of the participants, who lived with their Roma family (five participants). Relatedness, and thwarting the need for it, was brought forth by the participants as a sense of loneliness and outspoken rejection.

Creating friendships in a new environment can be challenging, and it may be even more problematic in a society with a cultural prejudice for people labelled with a negative stigma. Saara's experience of making friends with non-Roma peers after moving to a new city and starting school there, illustrates the general layer of prejudice. She describes the process of making friends in a new place, highlighting her social skills and support from her (elder) siblings:

> When I learned to know the other kids, it was better, the problems were gone. I got many friends, but it was so unfamiliar, there were no other gypsies there. Anyway, I'm quite a social person, so that I could make it go quite well. And if I was bullied, I told my elder siblings, and it stopped.

The participants brought the experiences of being targeted by prejudice up to date by talking about experiences of their school-aged children. The peer relationships of their own children with other school children at the time of the interviews was an issue brought forth by Ritva and Johanna. A shared element in their comments was the impact of the parents on the peer's behaviour. Ritva talked about her eight-year-old daughter in an interview (2016):

> Ritva: "I was talking with my daughter yesterday, and for the first time she told me, that she feels ashamed to say in school that she is a gypsy."
> Interviewer: "Did she tell you why?"
> Ritva: "'Well, then they would not play with me.' It's terrible that a little child can say that then they wouldn't play with me. Because I'm a gypsy."

Remembering her own school age Johanna talked about her eagerness to go to school, when a new girl came to school and started to play with her. Johanna described her feelings:

> I remember a girl, who was new in the school, she had been a good friend of mine several months by then, and I went to school eagerly, because I knew she was my friend. Then one day she told me that she is not allowed to play

> with me, that her mother had said that she cannot play with gypsies. And then I just, it was the end of that eagerness (to go to school), too.

Public humiliation as a child's experience can affect one's willingness to go to school and result in prolonged absences. Johanna told how she felt humiliated by peers and a teacher, and that she chose to stay at home doing household work and taking care of her younger siblings. During the process towards leaving school, she was often absent from school, and due to that, was not aware of issues discussed and taught at school in the meantime. Johanna described comments of her peers and her feelings during that time, linking her diminishing interest in school tasks with humiliating comments from her peers. She said:

> (After absences) you are so far behind others (in school subjects), that you don't understand what they are talking about, so, you are not interested any more, because, then the others: 'don't you know even that? well of course not, because she is a gypsy'.

This kind of outspoken prejudice linked Johanna's poor school achievement to her cultural background instead of her absence from school or abilities as a student.

A sense of being inappropriately placed in a special school and having one's learning abilities underestimated tends to diminish motivation to participate in school activities. Markus, a young father, had started school in Finland. After the first school year he moved with his family to Sweden for about a year, and after that back to Finland. At that point he was placed in a special school. Markus said that he didn't feel he had had problems with learning and that he felt a special school was not an appropriate placement for him, because the children there were different from him, with cognitive impairment or mental disorders.

> First, I was in a real school, then I was placed into a special school. I wasn't interested in school then, it was also because I was placed in the special class, they didn't kind of teach there. The other kids there, they were kind of disturbed and disabled, and those who didn't show up. We also had that moving (abroad for a year) then, couldn't go to school that much. It was kind of, the first thing in the morning, that you must go to such a school.

A change in proximate surroundings of a child, such as moving to another city, calls for resilience. Under such condition, adjusting oneself into the dynamics of an already existing group of children can be hard. Richard said in his interview that his family moved abroad when he went to the second grade, and every year to a new city, and he and his siblings changed school accordingly. Richard highlighted that there was bullying in the school environment, but outside school he had friends:

> Always new kids and they bullied us. Maybe they wouldn't have done it otherwise, but because we were gypsies, and there were no others, only Swedish children. But outside of school, we had friends among our neighbours.

Richard and his siblings entered a new social environment several times, having to spend time and energy to become accustomed to a new school again and again. In

addition to that, Richard linked bullying to his cultural background, suggesting that they wouldn't have been bullied, if they were not from a Finnish Roma background.

4.3 Prejudice shaping teacher-student relationships

The teacher as an important adult to a child, with his or her attitudes and presuppositions, can have a powerful impact on a student's wellbeing in the school context. Johanna did not mention any kind of support to help her continue in school from her third and fourth grade teacher. Instead, the teacher, who appeared to become the second and the last teacher during Johanna's school career, had a tendency to voice her prejudices of the Finnish Roma:

> The way she talked to me. You (Finnish Roma) don't so much go to school or do homework. So, at some point I didn't do homework anymore, and started to stay out of school, even though my parents didn't know that I didn't go to school, and I was only a third grader then.

Johanna also explained, that as an explanation for her absences from school, it was enough for the teacher to say that she had been ill. Johanna started to avoid the need-thwarting environment and ended up staying out of school.

Indeed, encounters with teachers can affect a child's school engagement in a crucial way, especially when not followed by support to persist in school. Markus explained that when he was eleven years old, there had been a conflict at school, something that he did not disclose in detail in his interview. However, the outcome of the incident had been that Markus remembered the headmaster saying; "Enough of them, no need to come back!" After that Markus chose to work in the stables owned by his family. When asked about interventions by school or child-care authorities, Markus said he did not remember any, and that it seemed to him, that the authorities were not interested in getting him back to school.

4.4 Living amid tensions between culturally important habits and surrounding expectations

A sense of cultural and familial habits not being understood by surrounding people created an experience of detachment and not belonging together with one's peers. Saara illustrates her experiences: "The sense of alienation, it's quite crucial in my childhood". She told about her experience of alienation, when adults at her school didn't know much about her culture, and there were no Roma adults among the school staff (more closely discussed by Pikkarainen et al. (2019). Saara told about how her family followed the habit of cultural purity related to dishes, food, and human body, and hoped that there would have been someone to understand what these meant to her.

> "A young Roma woman let's say in a cooking lesson, if she is not understood, she feels that she is an outsider. So, if there would be someone who could explain, so there would not be such an alienated feeling and that I do

> not want to go there, because they don't understand me. Even if not an assistant or a teacher, but some knowledge, that would be great. I wish my school had been like that."

Identifying oneself as a Finnish Roma has many levels, linked with one's familial habits and the family's relationships with other Finnish Roma families. A sense of being different from the majority, but also different from the majority of the Finnish Roma, emerged in Johanna's narrative account. She told:

> "My parents had a weird background. Their relationships to each other's families, the other to the other's family, in a way. We didn't meet them; we even didn't go to funerals or anything like that."

Johanna did not specify any reasons for non-existent relationships to extended families, but the situation resembles the avoidance custom, which structures the lives of the Finnish Roma (Berlin, 2015a, 2015b). The disconnection from the extended families of her parents was a life condition that left Johanna without peer support from other young Finnish Roma.

While lack of connections to one's extended family diminishes social relationships, strong commitment to cultural habits and participation may result in contradictions with institutional expectations of today's school. Johanna's husband's family was in the habit of taking children along to family gatherings. Johanna told about the contradicting pressures in the case of her son, who was at elementary school age at the time of the interviews, while the family was following the habit of her husband's extended family to participate in funerals.

> "The decline of this child started, when he was in the second grade, it was a year when many relatives of my husband died. It's very important for us Roma to be there, in the funerals. It is a really big thing in our culture, you are ashamed if you are not there. Well then, we were there, and our son, he was absent from school a lot, and there was a problem with it, the other children started to call him gypsy, or "manne", and the teacher, I don't know, I'll see about it, maybe I'll ask for permission (from the prison) to go and talk to the teachers myself."

Calling someone "manne", which is a word of spoken language referring to Finnish Roma, often includes an air of disrespect especially in public settings such as school. What Johanna told in her interview indicates a tension between the familial, cultural way of living and the way of acting Johanna perceived that even today's school authorities were expecting from her children. Johanna's son also faced bullying, in the form of calling names, which Johanna linked with his absences, due to the family's choice to attend the funerals as was culturally preferred.

Becoming an adult is an important transition in a young person's life, which often includes habits that a young person feels a need to follow. Richard explained that when he was fifteen, he started to visit relatives, as was a habit for Finnish Roma boys of his age. The following quote is from the first meeting with Richard.

> The interviewer: "You told about your decision to leave school, that it was made just like that. How was it, do you recall how it happened?"
> Richard: "Ay, I had other things to do. With adults, of course."

In the second interview the interviewer wanted to deepen her understanding of the matter and asked more about it.

> I: "About your decision to leave school, was it, that one morning you just decided not to go to school?"
> R: "No, it was not like that, I went to visit people, to another city, with relatives, I don't remember so strictly, did the teachers come in our home for a couple of hours, no, I don't think that…"
> I: "Not so easily?"
> R: "Yes, well and so it faded away"

Referring to adults triggered more talk about becoming an adult in Richard's family culture. Richard described his becoming an adult Roma man as a process, which included choosing to wear clothing recognizably typical to Roma men, in addition to joining other adults and visiting relatives with them, to which he referred to as 'other things to do', which excluded school from his life at the time.

> Richard: "You see, when a Roma boy is in that age, (13–15) he has to learn all the Roma things, even he wouldn't know everything, but there is the clothing, a boy wears dark trousers, they change to them at the age of about 13, I think I was 13 when I started to wear dark trousers, I was not told to do so, it came from here (showing his heart)."
> The interviewer: "So when you see that other adult men wear them?"
> R: "Yes, but at 15 he is like, he has to be kind of adult, even though he is not, in certain things."
> I:"Is it that you can decide more about your going to school, and other things?"
> R: "Yes."

Richard said that his parents urged him to persist in school, as his siblings did, but did not manage in the attempt. Instead, Richard told, that he moved back to Finland and started his own adult life by taking his first wife at the age of fifteen. He was occupied with a life which satisfied his need for relatedness, but where there was no space for going to school.

Another issue, which Richard linked with the cultural habits of his family was the avoidance of another Roma family, in a case of a conflict between families. Richard described, how the situation affected his school motivation, when the family had moved abroad:

> When I was child, my uncle killed a gypsy man, and so we had to move, since then we moved and moved to different places. We always heard, that the (other) family was looking for us, a year we could stay, then we had to move again. Well, it made me feel even more not to want to go to school.

Richard described his sense of wariness due to the threat to the safety of the family, that had coloured his life, because of the need to obey the avoidance custom. He also

mentioned that the avoidance custom was difficult to understand for someone who is an outsider to the Finnish Roma way of thinking.

> It's though, but it's the fact that we have grown into it, so that it is not, in a way, difficult at all. The kids don't know about it, but the adults, they don't even come to such a city, that it would be possible (to meet the family you should avoid). I've been talking about this with many (white) Finns, but they just cannot get it, it doesn't fit into their mind set how it is.

4.4.1 Accumulating obstacles regardless of cultural background

The participants, while being Finnish Roma, naturally also experienced life conditions and incidents which were not related to their cultural background. Four of the participants shared their experiences of having been clients of the child-care services: Saara as a teenager, Viljo and Ritva from the age of about ten and Allan from the age of two months. This indicates that there had been problems in parental care, as well as fragility of physical and psychological safety in their childhood environments, thus violating the psychological need for relatedness.

The poor economic situation of the family was also related to experiences of alienation from the peer group. Johanna described her feelings about poverty:

> My family couldn't afford to buy equipment for PE [physical education lessons], sport shoes like others had, there were seven of us (siblings), somehow it felt like, that I just don't go there, I felt so, kind of excluded.

Weak parental care, as well as poverty, are societal risk factors regardless of cultural background. However, belonging to a stigmatized minority may add obstacles to gaining approval among peers who belong to the majority people. Moreover, fragility in the sense of safety, as a life condition, creates a state of need frustration at a general level, as constantly thwarting the need for relatedness.

4.5 Positive experiences of relatedness in the school environment

The participants also described positive experiences of warm relationships with teachers and school assistants, as well as neutral attitudes towards their cultural background. About the neutral attitude, one of the participants, Saara, said:

> The teachers, they were quite normal towards me, only that they didn't know a thing of my culture… it would be important that there would be someone who knows the culture and understands.

This was supported by the interviewed Finnish Roma specialists, who proposed, that the teachers do not need to be experts of Finnish Roma culture, but ready to learn more form the families of their students.

Positive relationships with school adults resulted in school attendance and motivation to participate. Markus told about his relationship with a certain teacher, whom he remembered as supportive and understanding, with knowledge of his family:

> Yes, I liked to go there until the second, third grade, when there was the nice teacher, she had been teaching my parents, too. If we were lively, so that we had to get outdoors soon, she could handle it nicely. I didn't feel like, I want to hit the teacher on the head with a pencil case (laughs), but then she retired. After that I started to stay in the stables. I thought that I don't, I'll let the school be.

Markus linked his school motivation in the first grade with the way his teacher dealt with his liveliness in a kind way. Johanna described her first and second grade teacher, that she had been a supporting person for her, and that she started to avoid going to school only after her teacher had changed to another one. Johanna told about this teacher:

> If I was silent and not participating for some time, she was in a habit of asking me: 'And Johanna, what do you think?', encouraging me to talk. Maybe she thought that we gypsies need to be encouraged or something. I remember her as such a warm-hearted person.

In addition to warm relationships to some of the teachers, momentary friendships were reported as factors that drew the participants towards school and supported their sense of belonging to the school society.

5 Summary of the findings

As general level factors, underpinning the more specific levels of experience, we found elements that were related to Finnish Roma culture, namely cultural prejudice, and the avoidance custom of the Finnish Roma, as well as risk factors, which are shared regardless of cultural background, namely weak parental care, and poverty. Frustration of relatedness was present at the general level as a constant need to cope with outspoken prejudices of surrounding people, at the contextual level at school as rejection by peers, as well as some of the teachers and the parents of peers, and at the situational, personal level as experiences of loneliness and alienation. On the other hand, warm relationships with school personnel and momentary friendships with peers provided support for a sense of belonging to school society and created eagerness to go to school, though not strongly enough to keep the participants attending school.

6 Discussion and conclusions

We examined which kind of experiences of relatedness, and accumulating need frustration as members of a stigmatized group, and as a minority inside a minority, the participants identified as significant in their process of early school leaving. In addition to this, we investigated, what kind of meanings the participants gave to their positive experiences of relatedness. We identified aspects intertwined with the cultural background of the participants, such as cultural prejudice targeted to the

Finnish Roma by surrounding society, as well as elements affecting inside Finnish Roma families. Furthermore, we identified aspects that were not related to a cultural background but by adding to the load of already existing challenges created an accumulating effect. These non-culturally related elements were in line with challenges described in studies examining experiences of imprisoned early school leavers, who didn't report a specific ethnic or cultural background, as well as studies focusing on school engagement more generally.

As a culturally related general level factor, the negative stigma aimed at Finnish Roma in Finnish society, manifested itself at the contextual level as outspoken prejudice in the school environment, as well as exclusive talk and acts by peers. At the situational level, we identified experiences of alienation and loneliness due to rejection by peers and their parents, as well as adults in the school environment, and a lack of support after periods of absence from school. The non-culturally related risk factors, poverty and weak parental care, which the participants also reported, added obstacles to the participants' need satisfaction.

Situational incidents illustrated the accumulating effect of the more general need thwarting elements, influencing the interactions and experiences in the less general levels of need perceptions. There were notable peaks in the accumulation of need thwarting elements, when general layer cultural prejudice manifested itself as outspoken rejection in actors who were important for the child, e.g. teachers, peers and their parents. However, positive contextual elements in the school environment, such as a warm relationship with a teacher or a new friend among the peers, lead to more positive situational experiences than the more general layer of need thwarting. Our findings add knowledge about detailed insights for need perceptions, examined by a qualitative method, which Ryan and Deci (2020) have proposed as a line for future inquiry, to enrich the research body among SDT-related studies.

Related to living as a minority inside a minority, the participants of the study described how familial contradictions manifested themselves in their daily lives, not as a question of the bad reputation of the participants from which other Roma families would protect themselves. This contradicts the institutionally provided report by Vähemmistövaltuutettu (2014). Though, experiences of threat to safety of the family, which the participant linked to the avoidance custom of contradicting Finnish Roma families and living with only a few contacts to a larger Finnish Roma community, indicated that frustration of relatedness can also appear inside a cultural minority as a life condition. On the other hand, learning the custom and growing to live with it, was also described as an element of belongingness, while distinguishing the people familiar with the custom, and living by it, from the people who are ignorant of it.

In the case of the participants, the educational support system was lacking, or reacting too late, allowing young students to disappear from school, even though they had been recognized as students at risk of dropping out of school. Furthermore, the parents of the participants, even though trying to urge their children to go to school, didn't manage to do that. The situation left space for the participants to choose another kind of life, instead of completing schooling and accessing the labour market through education. The present study gave a voice to people facing multileveled exclusion. Their wish to be heard and the research framework within which they perceived trust and safety enhanced gaining important knowledge,

beneficial for improving educational policies and practices, as well as providing suggestions for the further development of concepts and research tools of Self Determination Theory.

Considering the theoretical frame of SDT, and the concept of basic psychological needs, the findings of the study indicate, in line with the reasoning of Ryan and Deci (2017), that the need perceptions are of a dynamic nature. Furthermore, experiences of need satisfaction can occur at different levels of generality. A momentary need support seemed to create a counter effect to need frustration, which had its origins in a more general level. Moreover, when elements of need thwarting accumulated, the participants tended to react by withdrawing from the frustrating environment. The findings of the present study suggest that situational need support can diminish the effect of general level need thwarting, for instance, when acts of friendship and acceptance are shown in an environment affected by cultural prejudices.

7 Limitations of the study and aspects for future studies

The study was conducted by non-Roma researchers. Finnish Roma insider insight is intertwined in the study though, through the co-operative nature of the narrative interviews. However, an outsider coming from the majority may not fully understand how the power relations are formed inside a group representing the Finnish Roma background. Hence, the meaning and influence of the custom to avoid other Roma families, as a way of living and, on the other hand, possibly making one vulnerable in larger society, provides further issues to investigate. Collaboration of non-Roma and Roma researchers in this kind of a highly sensitive issue would enhance in-depth understanding of research findings as Silverman (2018) has suggested. Furthermore, it remained unclear to what extent the participants, though representing Finnish Roma seen from the perspective of the researcher and identifying themselves as Finnish Roma might be situated in between Finnish Roma and Finnish majority cultures in the sense of meaning brought forth by Roman (2018) if seen from a perspective of a researcher coming from Finnish Roma background.

The experiences situated out of school in the narrative accounts have not been examined in this paper, which limits insight into the positive mind set of the participants. Accumulation of obstacles might indicate hopelessness, but among the participants that was not the situation. On the contrary, the participants described themselves as survivors. While waiting for the day to get out of prison, they had plans for the future and dreams to go for.

From an SDT perspective, the dynamics of accumulating need frustration, caused by multiple elements of need thwarting and consequences of continuous need frustration especially during developmental ages of childhood and youth, provide pathways for future investigations, as Vansteenkiste et al. (2020) also point out. Furthermore, it would be fruitful to investigate, whether, and how, consequences of a need thwarting life condition could be overpowered by contextual and situational need support. Combining cultural aspects and an SDT perspective, it would be interesting to explore, do experiences that rise from belonging to a rejected minority, and a need to cope in a negatively coloured atmosphere and prejudices, have an impact

on how people react to support or thwarting of the basic psychological needs. It would also be important to find out which elements make people more vulnerable in reacting to need thwarting experiences in a maladaptive way, versus elements that make people active in positive ways, when in the same situation. This invites us all to actions of outspoken support, instead of living by prejudices or ignoring the possibility, that our individual acts could make a difference.

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