A STUDY ON HOW THE USE OF ICT IN TRAVELLING PERIODS INFLUENCES ROMANI STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS SCHOOL

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Abstract

In 1998 Norway ratified the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and in1999 the Romanies and four other minorities obtained the status of a national minority group The Romanies have lived in Norway for hundreds of years. But the assimilation policy was hard and lasted for more than hundred years with the aim to assimilate and eradicate differences from what was perceived as the "Norwegian". The school has been an important part in this assimilation policy. Although we can see a different political climate marked by multiculturalism, acceptance of diversity and greater understanding of minority groups today, the culture and history of the national minorities has been, and still remains absent from school. And still many students of Romani families drop out of school without any exams when they are 13-14 years old. In this article a developmental project with the aim to make a better school situation for Romani students is examined concerning an attempt using ICT in the travelling periods. The use of laptops have made changes in the relational and communication patterns connected to an intercultural understanding, but many pupils still drop out of school before ending the compulsory school.
Key words: *Romani, ICT as communication tool, adapted learning, intercultural education.*

Introduction

Norway is currently characterized as a multicultural country where we normally think of the modern immigration that began in the late 60th and persists today. Immigrants have been received differently in different historical periods. The assimilation policy has been of great importance in order to assimilate and eradicate differences from what was perceived as the "Norwegian", and the school has been an important part in this assimilation policy lasting for more than hundred years and was not ended till the second half of the 1900s and. But in 1998 Norway ratified the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and in1999 five minority groups obtained the status of national minority groups (AID, 2000-2001). One of these groups is the Romanies. They have lived in Norway for hundreds of years. Most believe that the Romanies have the same origin as gypsies, but in Norway, they are described as two different minorities. It is unclear how many Romanies there are in Norway; many do not dare to come forward as a result of the strong assimilation strategy that was imposed on the group, but the Norwegian parliament states that they are approximately several thousand (AID, 2000–2001).

Romanies are characterized by the fact that they traditionally travelled around selling handmade products or exchanged these for food and other goods they needed, and there are still Romanies who maintain a travelling lifestyle related both to different types of work and to social gatherings. Although we can see the outline of a settlement with the assimilation policy and a different political climate marked by multiculturalism, acceptance of diversity and greater understanding of minority groups today, the culture and history of the national minorities has been, and still remains absent from school. The school has the task of socialization children and young people into the society, and knowledge about other cultures, geography, history, language and religion are important components in this context (KD, 2006). The need of knowledge in schools based on the fact that people with different backgrounds have the right of equal access to education are being visible and emphasized extra strongly through the rights of the national minorities to retain their own culture and identity and also to have the right to adapted learning.

Still many pupils of Romani families drop out of school without any exams when they are 13-14 years old, and some Romanies have in the recent years taken the initiative to projects with the aim to improve the integration of their children in school. But they are not a homogenous group, and till now some have had a segregation practice in society with isolation or practicing their own lifestyle, or they have chosen a fully assimilated lifestyle, often also with a denying of their own background (Halvorsen, 2004; Lund & Moen, 2010).

Background: "Romanies from Childhood to Adults" a School Project

With this background one of the Romani organizations, "Taternes Landsforening", in 2003 took the initiative to collaborate with two University Colleges in Trondheim, Norway to improve the school situation for Romani children. A project was drawn up with the aim of raising the Romani culture to be highlighted as a minority culture and to make the school situation for their children more positive. In all thirteen primary and secondary schools were involved in the project. The schools were focusing on various issues related to Romanies as a national minority. Seven of the schools tried testing ICT as a communication tool in the Romanies` travelling periods**.** All the schools had a strong focus on the relation between school and the family trying to give the families more trust in school and education. Romani families who have chosen to travel often find they loose contact with the home school. Many say they find it difficult to return to school after a trip. Some families therefore choose to move to a new location where they are not known. Through experiments with the use of ICT, the participants hoped they would manage to keep more contact with the school and that it would be easier to come back to the same school after travelling. Each family was given a laptop during the travelling periods. In the beginning they used a mobile phone as an internet modem, but the technology improved, and within one year we were able to remove the link with mobile phones and replace them with a small device which plugs directly into the machines to get internet access. This made it easier to handle and take care of the equipment. The teachers did not get any guidance on how to use ICT. They were encouraged to use a dialogue forum and the learning platform, if one was used by the school. A main goal was that Romani children would experience school more relevant and complete the compulsory school of ten years.This article has mainly focused on aspects of the project related to the use of ICT. During the period of this project, not many primary schools had started to use learning platforms (LMS) in Norway. Secondary schools used it more frequently. And where and if it was used, it was for giving information about school work and for communication. The main ICT-focus was on ICT as a communications tool; teachers and pupils should be able to send and receive e-mail and be able to communicate in a dialogue forum. Variations in use and competence were mainly related to age, but the teachers' user competence also varied. All the teachers used mail and internet. Dialogue forums were

unknown to most of them. The ICT use should be arranged in a realistic way according to the different circumstances of the school and the pupils.

A developmental project aims to develop and change a situation, and it is also an advantage that the need for change should be made visible by the participants themselves (Grøterud & Nilsen 2001). In this context the schools were not prepared for the initiative; they lacked knowledge about Romani history and culture, and at the beginning of this project the expectations of the various participants were unclear. Most teachers were initially skeptical; many had prior experiences that these pupils did not do school work in periods of travelling and doubted whether they would do more if they had a computer. This resulted in a relatively slow starting process at the schools and of their analysis of what could be changed, strengthened or renewed. We gathered the teachers and school leaders to network meetings with the focus on Romani history and experience of life and the Romanies' situation as a minority within a multicultural school, building relations and closer cooperation between school and home. In addition, we had sessions with teachers and school leaders where talks were more unstructured. The intention was to increase the teachers' and school leaders' experience and understanding of the Romani pupils' school situation. It is difficult to tell exactly how many pupils participated in the project. Some families moved to new locations, and even though we have tried to follow them in the new location, we have been dependent on whether the new schools are willing to participate. In several of the schools there have been one or more families with more than one child while in a couple of schools only one child participated. The project participants from the University Colleges were leaders of the project and did also the research. Sør-Trøndelag University College focused and made a qualitative research on teachers' and school leaders' experiences in school, the participants from Queen Maud's College had their focus on the Romani culture and on the family situations and interviewed the parents (Larsen, Lund, Moen, & Moen, 2007).

The Researcher's Role

It must be underlined that our viewpoint from Sør-Trøndelag University College, Queen Maud's College and the school representatives are based in a majority culture, while we discuss a minority culture. This is a factor that can influence the interpretation. It is therefore important to be aware that both our observations and our interpretations can be coloured by lack of understanding of and insight into the Romanies' world. A representative of the Romani Organization cooperated in the project. To be in direct contact with people who have a traveller background and experience has been a very useful support for the lack of insight into the minority viewpoint, also because people working at the schools were opposed to the project from the start. She was also necessary to legitimize the project for the traveller families.

Theoretical Perspective

Assimilation Policy and School Situation

The assimilation policy in Norway was hard. Historians have showed that this may have the reason connected to Norway as a young national state and the grounding of a nation based on the imagination of *one* culture and *one* language. All other groups were looked upon as strangers (Kjeldstadli, 2003; Engen, 2010; AID, (2000-2001)). This politics has strongest attacked groups of people with a travelling lifestyle. To eradicate these minority groups' culture and way of living has been a stated policy (Dyblid & Bjerkan, 1999; Gotaas, 2007; Halvorsen, 2004; Hvinden, 2001). On Svanviken working colony on Møre, run by the organization Norwegian Mission for Homeless People and closed down as late as 1986, Romanies were taught to live like other Norwegians. It was forbidden to talk their own language and to sing their own songs (Hvinden, 2001; Pettersen, 1999). Children were taken away from their parents and sent

to foster homes and women were sterilized. It was not until 1998 that the municipal and regional minister at that time officially apologized on behalf of the Norwegian government to the Romanies for the injustice that had been done. The history has affected the school situation for the Romanies. And as a result of the extremely strict assimilation policy, some Romanies still have little confidence in the public sector, and schools have in this respect been an important institution. Many grown-ups therefore have a lack of schooling and are having bad experiences with the Norwegian school system, great distrust at school, poor skills in reading and writing themselves and do not always see the need for education (Halvorsen, 2004; Hvinden, 2001; Møystad, 2008; Lund, 2009). In addition, there are many Romanies who feel that school is not well adapted to their needs. Engen (2010) emphasizes that schools still have an imagined community constructed from the vision of *one* culture and *one* language where the divergent identities not are made visible. And as long as the school does not take the knowledge of the national minorities into account and thus does not necessarily facilitate the educational needs of minorities who might want this related precisely to the characteristics of language or culture, these pupils still do not get the confirmation of identity that gives pride in relation to their minority affiliation. But the ratification of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities means among other things that the school must make conditions favourable such that Romanies, *who want to,* can continue their travelling lifestyle, while at the same time their children are guaranteed adapted learning. Parliament's statement 15 (AID, 2000-2001) formulates the challenge as follows:

> "Both the Romani people (Romanies/those who travel) and Rom (gypsies) are groups where travelling is part of their lifestyle. Education at school is not always adjusted to this lifestyle. The government nevertheless adds that the right and the duty of education concern all children equally. For that reason there can be a need to develop education types which can be practised even if pupils travel parts of the year" (AID, 2000-2001, 46).

The concept of intercultural education describes an interaction between individuals or groups with different cultural backgrounds (Lorentz & Bergstedt, 2006) and discusses among other things, democratic understanding and behavior with a focus on human rights. The education also must be perceived as relevant for all (Carlsen, 2005; Lahdenperä, 1995, 2004). But the long unified tradition in the Norwegian school focusing equality and one common national culture (Gullestad, 2002; KD, 2006; Seeberg, 2003) may conflict with this. An intercultural practice in school may also have the possibility to give the Romani child adapted learning based on knowledge of their background and history as essential to the development of Norway today.

Use of ICT in School

There is no clear vision of how ICT functions in schools (Krumsvik, 2004; Balanskat, Blamire and Kefala, 2006; Machin, McNally & Silva, 2006). Some argue that ICT is not a learning tool (Cuban, 2001), but can act as a catalyst for various processes of change related to how people communicate, for democratic process and to connect people in new ways (Krumsvik, 2004). Other studies show that ICT can be a learning tool in some subjects (Machin, McNally & Silva 2006), and still other say it is a motivating factor (Isnes, Håland & Hernes, 2001). Niederhauser and Stoddart (2001) conducted a big survey in the United States, and among others the results indicated that getting pupils to use ICT effectively requires more than just supplying the machines. The survey pointed out that effective use of ICT as a tool for learning requires that those with teaching responsibilities need to possess ICT skills to a high level. A Norwegian report from 2005 ITU describes digital literacy as skills, knowledge, creativity and attitude that everyone needs for using digital media for learning and mastering the knowledge society (ITU, 2005). Among other things the users' digital competence is essential together with motivated teachers and support from the school leader.

Methodology of the Research

This research is done within a qualitative framework (Creswell 1998; Postholm 2005). The purpose is not to give clear answers, but to get a deeper understanding of the Norwegian teachers' thoughts and reflections. We therefore chose to use open questions to get the most spontaneous reactions, and the interviews had the character of a conversation, even though they were based on an interview guide. It was desirable to gain a better understanding of school leaders' and teachers' experiences of Romanies' situations relating to several areas: school achievement, relationship building, relation between school and home, the school's understanding of the relationship between minority and majority, and experiences with the use of ICT in the travelling periods. This article has its focus on the use of ICT in the travelling periods, and in spring and autumn 2007 we conducted qualitative interviews with six school leaders and fifteen teachers. Being leaders of the project gave in addition insight in the teachers' situations connected to their Romani pupils.

Interpretations of the material show that teachers and school leaders focused on how ICT is used and on conditions for using ICT. The interviews also show that the use of ICT has influenced the contact and intercultural understanding between Romanies and school (Lund, 2010). But so far we do not see that the use of ICT has had any influence on whether the pupils continue the secondary school or not.

Results and data analyses

How ICT is Used

The current study shows that there are several factors which become clear in relation to the conditions for use of ICT. The first factor concerns the participants' ICT competence. One teacher said: "I wonder how much rest they'll get; that should be clear, in a caravan with 3 kids." At the same time many teachers were uncertain about their own ICT competence and worried about ICT use during travelling periods possibly causing more work for them. Some however wanted to make the best of it as they were already involved in the project. One teacher says: "It takes time for me as a teacher to work with adapted education on the internet. The internet is slow." There were also teachers who considered the work as a good learning arena for themselves: "To start with, it was rather technical, but apart from that, I learned a lot myself" (Lund, 2010). Some teachers concern the maintenance and handling of technical equipment:

> "The family has two computers. That did not function very well. There was something with the card she had a problem with, but then she used the machine of her younger brother, and all in all it went fine. It turned out that the biggest problem the girl had, was to handle the equipment in such a way that it worked".

Some teachers also found that they did not know how to use ICT in a good way for effective communication training. It can be said that the teachers are having a responsibility to increase their own ICT competence in a way that they can handle the laptops and that this is part of the teachers' responsibility for arranging education adapted to the individual pupil. On the other hand many teachers believe this is a form of adapted education that lies outside their responsibility, and not all teachers are technically competent.

Especially in primary schools some teachers chose to give special information on e-mail to the pupils when they were travelling. This information could be linked to tasks and subjects, but it could also be of a more personal nature where the pupil was encouraged to talk about their trip or special events when travelling, or the teacher and pupil would send small greetings. One

of the pupils experienced her mother dying during the travelling period, and the fellow pupils expressed their sympathy with words and drawings through a dialogue forum. If the school and the girl had not used the lap top or dialogue forum, this girl would not have got these messages from her class mates. Now she experienced a belonging to the school also when travelling; someone at school cared for her.

After a while many teachers also became conscious that parents should be able to help their children using the laptop during travelling. "Don't think parents can work with a computer. Maybe we should offer to teach them?" one teacher said (Lund 2010). Some schools already have planned giving the parents some ICT knowledge making it easy to help their children when needed. This also is important for the families' feeling of belonging and acceptance.

When we conducted the interviews, some teachers said the use of ICT did not work as well as they wanted it to, but we think the laptops have made changes in the relational and communication patterns between Romanies and schools in such a way that the confidence between the families and the school has improved.

The head masters on the secondary schools expressed concerns about the pupils' ability or willingness to complete the compulsory education: "Boys often join their father's work and girls take care of younger siblings. The threshold is low to let the children leave school without any exams, although many parents at the same time express their belief in school as important for their children". These parents see their traditional way of living as difficult in the future and they want their children to have a real choice in life. But the tradition for ending school is still strong, and many parents lack school practice themselves. We did not see any differs in this related to weather the pupils got the possibility to use ICT or not. But pupils who borrowed a laptop in travelling periods had more contact with the school than before even though the experiences varied.

At several schools teachers talked about changes in working practices in the periodes of travelling as a result of the use of computers (Lund, 2010).

"There is a difference between what she does now, having a computer, and when she did not have one. Last year I gave her books to take with her, but she did not return them, and she did not do anything. Now we have been in contact 3–4 times a week, and she does all the exercises she was given. The computer has made a difference".

Another teacher in the primary school says:

"There has been more mail than communication, but I do get other feedback that it has arrived, and I think that is more important than getting a reply on the machine. She is coming back and has done page 50 in her maths book. She has managed to sit down in the caravan and do something."

We observe that this teacher finds the new contact most important; the use of ICT had made a difference even though this pupil did not use the laptop for answering the mails. But the child used the laptop to read information from the teacher. This may be a good way using ICT as a tool for communication for the smallest children.

Intercultural Understanding

In the beginning several teachers said that the Romanies had to take the responsibility for lack of education if they chose to travel, but participation in the project resulted in changes. Several teachers and principals now had a focus on the Romani culture, not only on the Norwegian way of seeing it or on what the pupils did not master.

"... It's important that children get a feeling for their culture, what it is. And if they get something out of it when they are older, then they can try it out. I feel it is right they leave and that we should make it possible", said one of the teachers. One teacher in the higher primary school talked about how she had changed her own understanding about the Romanies' rights to travel and explained it like this: "Lack of knowledge is the best way to develop prejudice. Information is the best way to remove it". Knowledge about the Romanies' history and rights as a national minority surely helps to change the understanding of a pupil's background. One school leader expressed it like this:

"The project has done something with me and with the school and the teachers who have been in it. It has something to do with consciousness and social relations, (...) so we can handle travelling as something natural."

Discussions

It has been claimed that the use of ICT can function as a catalyst for various processes of change in relationships (Watson, 2001; Krumsvik, 2004). By offering Romanies computers during travelling periods the school as an institution has broken with the routines that were used earlier in Romanies' travelling periods where there were no contact between the school and the pupil (Lund, 2009). It was also common that Romani pupils suddenly stayed away from school for a period of time without any preparation for this. Now schools report that they are more often informed before an absence. The offer to borrow a laptop has brought it about that traveller families experience that the school takes their way of living more seriously. If they wanted, they got the opportunity to continue travelling as a part of their cultural characteristics and could at the same time have a communication and contact with the school as a learning arena. This has increased confidence and can help to improve relationships between school and the traveller families (Lund, 2009). Several traveller families also expressed that they now find it easier to come back to school. This has made it easier to discuss their life situation with respect to school, and those involved can positively develop their relationship, also in periods where the families do not travel. This does not mean that travelling needs to be done more often. In some situations it would even be possible that families stay home longer because they feel they are accepted.

When we started the project, it was unknown to the participants that Romanies were a national minority group (Lidèn, 2005; AID, 2000–2001) and that this entails certain rights. The principle of adapted learning for all (KD, 2006) can be perceived as difficult for teachers to combine with the Romanies' nomadic lifestyle, specially in a school still having an imagined community constructed on a vision where divergent identities not are made visible.

Several teachers prepared for better dialogues and interaction with pupils and families. Knowledge may in turn make the preparation of exercises and the use of ICT more adapted to every child's life situation, which makes schoolwork in travelling periods easier and more accessible. One of the teachers says that due to the use of the computer during travelling periods she can set higher demands concerning written assignments and homework, because the pupil can make use of the information that is on the internet. The teacher expresses that the computer has a positive effect on her relationship with the pupil. Another teacher at the same school seems to be almost enthusiastic when she talks about the results of using the laptop. Her contact with the pupil has become closer, also during travelling periods (Lund, 2009).

The term intercultural practice can be used in connection with teaching processes or interactions linked to an extended understanding through self-awareness and meetings based on good quality communication processes between teacher and pupil (Lahdenperä, 1995, 2004). It is most important that the school is aware that differences should also be communicated in a positive way to prevent ethnic categorizations (Seeberg, 2003).The challenge for schools is to look at their practices to evaluate how this can be organized so the pupils both have the opportunity to live their life based on characteristics of their own culture while the school must provide

for effective learning for pupils when the family chooses to travel. This requires close collaboration with pupils and good relationships between schools and families. It also requires that the school has knowledge of both the individual student's situation and the minority group's history and way of life today.

For Romanies on a journey, ICT may functions as a tool to maintain previously learned knowledge. At the same time communication through e-mail, a dialogue forum or through a learning platform gives the single child the experience of belonging to a school and a learning community even when travelling, and the use of computers in the travelling periods can give traveller children contact with the school, which they would not otherwise have had. This is a change in the relationship and communication patterns. At the same time, we see that there are large unused potentials associated with the use of educational software, computer games and more interactive synchronous activity, even for the youngest pupils both for learning and communication.

How the computer equipment is handled and taken care of is important for its practical use while travelling. If teachers, parents or pupils themselves do not have the technical expertise that enables them to repair a computer, the damaged equipment easily becomes a major challenge. And it may be useful to provide in-depth user training in a fairly detailed manner for both teachers, pupils and parents, and perhaps also for older siblings. After the program had been tested over a certain period, it appeared necessary for the school and the homes to make clear agreements about how the equipment should be handled and that the school could help with practical arrangements in advance of a travelling period. The principals on the schools gradually understood that they must be responsible for repairs, while recognizing that both computer skills and equipment must be secured before use.

Conclusions and Implications

In conversations with teachers and with represents of Romanies, both expressed that trust towards school had became stronger. The Romanies said the offer to use computers during travelling periods was understood as a hand stretched out to them by society (Larsen, Lund, Moen & Moen, 2007). Giving the parents the possibility for a course in how to use ICT, might be experienced in the same way.

If pupils of Romani families are going to use computers in the travelling periods, the digital competence must be on a level that makes this possible. This may be better if the parents will have the necessary ICT competence, too. To give these parents a course in the use of ICT, might at the same time be a way to build relations between home and families. That might be understood as the school accepts their way of living. If the primary and secondary schools make good cooperation practice, it would be possible for the secondary school to continue the cooperation that may have been started and settled with the families in primary school related on trust and recognition. Starting with the use of ICT as a communication tool in travelling periods in primary school, might make it easier to use ICT even as a tool for learning in secondary school. The combination of close relations to school and a good digital competence could be an important element in the work to motivate the student and family to complete the compulsory education of ten years in school. Most teachers and school leaders who participated differently expressed that the use of ICT led to a greater openness between schools and families and in different ways to a better integration. But we find it difficult to seay that this is due to the computers alone. Important is probably also the attention the pupils received and teachers' training related to the Romani culture and history.

Knowledge about Romanies as a national minority group with special rights as well as the right to receive adapted learning on the same level as other children in the Norwegian school, has done something both to attitudes and actions among teachers and principals in the

project. The digital competence among the users in this project was mainly not very high, and digital competence is probably not enough in this situation. But an adapted education based on high digital competence in a combination with knowledge about the Romanies history and rights as a national minority today, may probably give more pupils the experience of school as relevant.

We examined a small project. But as a result of the lack of knowledge in schools about the Romanies, the Parliament in Norway this autumn decided that school leaders and teachers on a national level auth to have more knowledge about Romanies and their right for adapted learning. This also require knowledge about the use of ICT on a high level for teachers and in the teacher education and knowledge about how to make this visible in practice for those Romani families wanting to maintain a travelling life stile. It is a hope that pupils from traveller families will feel that school might be more interested in their way of living and that their experiences when they are travelling might also be interesting for the rest of school. At the same time both the teachers and other pupils will get to know more about life as a traveller. In this way ICT can act as a mediation tool for an intercultural understanding (Lund, 2009). It may seem from this that lending laptops has strengthened the Romanies' confidence in the school as an organization.

In the future this might give more Romani pupils the possibility to fulfil their exams after the compulsory school and give the children a real possibility to choose weather to stay on with a travelling life stile or to take an education suited for a more stable life.

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