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Beyond Black and White: counter-stories of national minorities in Norway in encounters with ignorance and racism in education

Kristin Gregers Eriksen  and Vibeke Kieding Banik 

Department of Culture, Religion and Social Studies, University of South-Eastern Norway, Drammen, Norway

ABSTRACT

This article is based on interviews with 15 members of the National minorities in Norway – the Roma, Romani/Tater, Jews, Kven, and Forest Finns – concerning their experiences with learning about their own cultures in school. The authors apply Critical Race Methodology to highlight the counter-stories of participants. The participants navigate complex landscapes of identity work and desire for belonging, in a context recognized by sanctioned ignorance concerning Norway's racist and colonial legacy. They speak back to common narratives of national minorities as victims, asserting their presence, diversity, and contributions to Norwegian history. The analysis demonstrates that racism experienced by National minorities is at particular risk of being ignored in alleged post-racial Norway. The authors argue the necessity of developing a more fine-grained analytical vocabulary to understand racism and whiteness in the Norwegian context. The discussion is connected to the wider international context concerning the pushbacks towards Critical Race Theory (CRT).

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Introduction

In our conversation with two young Norwegian Roma women we hear a story of pride in their Roma identities and belonging. They talk about a childhood and upbringing where the close ties of the Roma community represented warmth, belonging, and joy. The women express how the Roma identity makes them feel special, but that they also want to be regarded as Norwegians. However, moving outside the community spaces represents potential threats to the safe space they experience within their community. The women talk about efforts to hide their Roma background in school, and experiences with bullying, exclusion and slurs when their fellow students nevertheless found out. They talk about feeling invisible when the teacher omits the two pages covering Roma culture in the social studies textbook in their teaching, and immense pride when a teacher highlights their backgrounds as valuable. When we ask them about their experiences with racism, they hesitate and look reluctantly at each other, and in a low voice, one of the women asks her friend: 'What is it that they call us again ...?' The other does not reply, and the first continues: 'Dirty, filthy, criminal ...' The women then talk about how they are repeatedly

CONTACT Kristin Gregers Eriksen  kristin.eriksen@usn.no

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followed by guards in shopping malls due to being identified as Roma, and that they hardly ever go there anymore.

This story illustrates several aspects of the complexities in being a racialised minority in Norwegian society today: The navigation of complex landscapes of pride and prejudice, in one moment being overtly visible and essentialised, in the next the notion that their cultures and identities are ignored (Døving 2022). What was also striking in the encounter is the sense of everyday routine related to how the young women describe the explicit racism they face. This must be understood in relation to how anti-Roma, the specific racism targeted against groups such as the Roma and Travellers, is normalised. Selling (2013, 13) describes anti-Roma sentiments as a historically changing discourse formation containing a conceptual ‘Gypsy’, as basis for discriminatory structures and practices. Activists and researchers argue that anti-Roma sentiments need to be specifically named, not because it differs from other forms of racism, but because it in many contexts is especially strong, massive, specific, yet ignored (Lauritzen 2023). Normalization of anti-Roma attitudes in Norway is confirmed through two large-scale surveys from 2022. They found that 32% of the population do not want any social contact with Roma, and that two thirds of the population hold a negative outlook towards Roma as a group (Moe 2022; NIM 2022).

Roma is one of five officially recognised national minorities in Norway, the other being the Romani/Tater, Jews, Kven, and Forest Finns. The groups have vastly different histories, cultures, and languages, but hold similar rights to protection as minorities, entrenched in the Council of Europe *European Framework Convention on National Minorities* (hereby the Framework Convention), ratified by Norway in 1999. The groups also have in common historical experiences with state-led assimilation, racism. For the Roma and Jews, this history also includes genocide¹ and exclusion (Brandal, Alexa Døving, and Thorson Plesner 2017; Brustad et al. 2017).

As a result of the legal commitments of the Framework Convention, Norwegian school authorities have updated the national curriculum to further emphasise National minorities’ histories and cultures. The Core curriculum, covering education from year 1–13, states that National minorities ‘... have contributed to the Norwegian cultural heritage, and the teaching and training shall impart knowledge about these groups’ and that schools ‘shall support the development of each person’s identity [and] make the pupils confident in who they are’ (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2018, 6). Hence, the Norwegian education system holds a dual responsibility towards National minorities: Firstly, children from the National minorities have rights to an education that is sensitive to and provide space for development of their cultural and religious identities. Secondly, all students in Norway should gain knowledge about National minorities through their education (Banik 2024). Although research is scarce, studies suggest that the general population hold little to no knowledge about the groups, and that teaching, textbooks and the media reproduce stereotypical and limiting discourses of victimization and absence (Kalsås 2018; Martinsen 2023; NIM 2022).

Yet, no one has asked how individuals with a background related to a national minority perceive teaching about their own groups. In this article, we explore perspectives from the national minorities related to their experiences and perspectives on the role of education in this regard. Based on methodological principles from Critical Race

Methodology (CRM) and counter-storytelling (D'Arcy 2017; Solórzano and Yosso 2002), we ask what stories are told by individuals identifying as national minorities concerning their education, and how these stories speak back to or challenge hegemonic narratives.

The elusive and yet tenacious presence of racism in our material caught our attention. In many ways, the dynamics of racism as an underlying structure in educational narratives and experiences mirrors descriptions in international literature (Gillborn 2021; Ladson-Billings 2009; Leonardo 2009). The analysis demonstrates that racism experienced by national minorities are at particular risk of being silenced or ignored by and with the common refusals to theorise race and whiteness (cf. Fylkesnes, du Plessis, and Massao 2024). The refusals are enabled by the idea of an Exceptional North, and a notion of Norway as a post-racial society. We discuss how the informants' narratives can inform and further bring precision to understandings of racism in the Norwegian context. We reflect upon the methodological challenges of researching racism in a Nordic context in which concepts related to race, whiteness and racism are commonly tabooed and thus not always acknowledged (Keskinen 2024). In the final discussion, we situate the refusal to acknowledge race, racism and whiteness in the Norwegian context within broader discussions of the anti-CRT (Critical Race Theory) rhetoric in the UK and US over the recent years (Gillborn 2024). We emphasize how racism in the Norwegian context can be seen in connection to wider global structures of race, whiteness and coloniality. However, we also underline the need to pay attention to contextual factors shaping the manifestations of racism.

Methodology

This article is a result of a project on developing a textbook for teacher education on National minorities in Norway. We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a total of 15 individuals self-identifying as belonging to one of the national minority groups. In addition, we have also visited organizations, museums, and cultural centres, and consulted their staff, but the individual interviews are the empirical basis for the analysis in this article. The initial aim of the research was to provide knowledge on the experiences and perspectives of the national minorities, to secure participation from stakeholders in developing the book. The findings from interviews informed descriptions of the groups as well as the pedagogical recommendations presented in the textbook. Representatives of the groups were also included among the authors of the textbook, but they are not part of this study.

Method, material and analytical approach

The methodological approach in this article starts from the claim that the combination of counter-stories and CRT, including its methodological counterpart (CRM), is well versed to challenge a status quo within the education system (D'Arcy 2017). CRM is a theoretically grounded approach to research that foregrounds race and racism, with an explicit goal of dismantling prejudice and social injustice (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Informed by CRT, we understand racism as incorporated in societal structures and practices, at times also in unintentional ways (Gillborn 2021). Thus, CRT challenges the alleged neutrality and colour-blindness of educational institutions and emphasises

how uninterrupted racism informs and upholds master narratives about society and nation states (Fylkesnes 2019; Gillborn 2024; Ladson-Billings 2009). Counter-storytelling is a key tool in CRM to expose and resist hegemonic and limiting discourses and empower minority narratives to challenge the perspectives reflected in society about these groups (Fage-Butler 2021). CRM counters the so-called 'stock stories' that may reproduce stereotypes and narrow conceptualizations of minorities in education (D'Arcy 2017, 636).

In our interviews, we aimed for the participants' own stories to take the lead, asking questions such as 'What do you remember from your own schooling related to your identity and background?', and 'What is important for you about your belonging to a national minority group?' We also deliberately asked for experiences with feeling proud or empowered in educational settings, and about how they envision teaching in the future, to enable positive counter-stories. We deliberately looked for how individuals expressed agency, self-determination concerning identity, and how they spoke back to racist discourses and prejudice they encountered in society. Following the guidelines of CRM, we emphasized the centrality of experiential knowledge as critical to understanding racial subordination (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). The analysis was conducted on the basis of principles from collective qualitative analysis, in which the dialogical process of working analytically in researcher teams is applied strategically to enhance depth and validity in the analysis (Eggebo 2020). Informed by CRT, we do not claim an alleged neutral stance in the analysis. Rather, we deliberately scanned the material for statements related to racism and racial power dynamics at play.

Sampling, participants, and ethical considerations

National minorities is primarily a legal term stemming from the Framework Convention, setting out the rights of these groups to protection and promotion of their languages and cultures. While the Roma and Jews are present in almost all European states, the groups who gained status as national minorities differ in each country. In Norway the definition encompasses groups that have a permanent presence for more than 100 years, and who claim the status. As stated above, the groups are vastly different, and the differences amount to a methodological problem in terms of studying them as one group. As the aim of this article is to understand the minorities' situation in relation to requirements in the national curriculum, we approach as a common category, in line with the curriculum documents.

The study was approved by the *Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research* (SIKT). The sample is based on snowballing and access. This implies that we have probably reached those who are outspoken about their background and trusted us and our project to the extent they wanted to speak with us. The latter is vital, as access is a quite complex aspect when approaching these groups. Many have collective traumas in relation to research (see for example Lauritzen, Selling, and Stenroos 2022). The sample is therefore not representative in relation to the number of participants from each group or their experiences when attending school. We did not access members of the Romani/Tater group. We did not include the indigenous Sámi in the study. Although the Sámi and the National Minorities share experiences and histories with racism and colonial oppression in Norway, there are several differences. Holding status as indigenous, the

Sámi enjoys much more comprehensive rights and levels of self-governance. The body of research related to Sámi experiences and education is also more substantial. In this study, it was an explicit aim for us to centre the experiences of the national minorities as invisibilised in society to the extent that some may not even know they exist (NIM 2022).

As the groups numerically constitute a small part of the overall Norwegian population, we do not go in detail on the sample due to concerns of anonymity in accordance with Norwegian norms of research ethics. We originally sought participants aged 18–25, as they have the most recent experiences from schooling. As this proved difficult, mainly due to the sensitivity of the topic, we pragmatically expanded the criteria. The sample therefore also includes participants of higher ages who work as teachers or in museums, organisations, or cultural centres, communicating extensive knowledge about one or more of the groups. We use pronouns indicating gender and give the approximate age, such as ‘young’ or ‘middle aged’.

The interviews were conducted in spaces and formats based upon practicalities and the participants’ preferences. This included physical meetings in spaces chosen by participants, online interviews, and interviews in pairs. For the young Roma participants, who due to the normalisation of anti-Roma are particularly vulnerable, the interviews were conducted in a familiar space to them, where social service officers with an established relationship with the participants were present immediately after the interview. All participants were informed that they could withdraw their statements at any time without further explanation and that recordings and notes of the interviews were stored safely and deleted when the project ended.

The authors have long experience as teachers in social studies education, and with research with and about racism and minorities, in particular Jews and the indigenous Sámi. We identify as white ciswomen, although the first author has a family history of Sámi and Kven heritage. Like many other Norwegians, due to the assimilationist efforts of the state during the 19th and 20th century, she has grown up without this knowledge or connection to the communities or languages.

‘The Exceptional North’: complexities and ambivalences of ‘seeing’ racism

Although national identity in Norway and the Nordic countries has been developed around notions of a cultural and racial homogeneity historically, Norway has always been inhabited by different groups (Keskinen, Skaptadóttir, and Toivanen 2019; Kjeldstadli 2003). The indigenous Sámi have inhabited the ancestral homeland of Sápmi² from the earliest settlements in the North. The Kven and the Forest Finns originally immigrated from Finland to the northern (Kven) and southern (Forest Finn) parts of Norway from the 15th century and onwards. The ancestors of the Romani/Tater and the Roma originated from India more than a thousand years ago and were prosecuted and enslaved in Central Europe for centuries, associated with the stigma of Gypsy (Lauritzen 2023). Despite historical commonalities, the Norwegian Romani/Tater and the Roma are two distinct groups with different histories, cultures, and languages, and who immigrated to Norway at different times (for the Romani/Tater around 1500, for the Roma from 1850). Jewish presence was allowed in Norway only after a constitutional change in 1851, and the majority migrated from Tsarist-Russia from 1890s onwards. Thus, the histories

and cultures of the National minorities are a part of Norwegian history and heritage locally and nationally. At the same time, the groups have maintained and developed their own identities as minorities.

With the emergence of nationalism and subsequent construction of a Norwegian national identity, the Norwegian state from the 1850s developed political strategies towards the Sámi and National minorities based on principles of assimilation and exclusion. These policies are commonly termed Norwegianisation (Brandal, Alexa Døving, and Thorson Plesner 2017). Although Norwegianisation is mostly used to describe policies towards the Sámi, Kven and Forest Finns, the same rationale also serves shaped the overall policy towards minorities in the period of Norwegian nation-building. Berg-Nordlie (2024) points out that Norwegianisation had discriminatory consequences for minorities through strategic policies with explicit assimilationist goals, and indirectly through policies that implicitly prioritised the majority population. This distinction is particularly relevant for assessing and understanding minority politics today. Studies of Nordic welfare state structures find that even in policies allegedly entrenched in principles of integration and egalitarianism, race hierarchies are upheld and silenced. This mechanism of constructing the Nordic welfare state as a 'space free of race' has been described as 'racial Nordicism' (Keskinen 2024, 46).

The Norwegianisation policies were officially discontinued in the decades after World War II. Despite this, the logics of homogeneity, whiteness, and assimilation continued to influence Norwegian society in more subtle ways (Gullestad 2002). In 2023, a governmentally appointed Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC)³ launched their report on the history and consequences of Norwegianisation. The TRC concluded that even after its formal discontinuation, social structures and processes leading to assimilation are still in place (TRC. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Norway 2023). Research on educational discourses and practices find that even as the official policies today value diversity and inclusion, the Norwegian educational system upholds a homogenous national imaginary that excludes minorities, in particular through the education system (Eriksen 2021; Fylkesnes 2019; Jore 2022).

Norwegianisation was partly legitimised through what is now termed scientific racism, in addition to outspoken anti-Roma attitudes and antisemitism among the general population and the authorities. This included the near extinction of the culture and language among Forest Finns; the exclusion and eviction of Roma leading to fatal consequences during the Holocaust; forced adoptions of Romani/Tater children and sterilizations of Romani/Tater women; and systems of boarding schools and language prohibition for the Kven as well as the indigenous Sámi. Nordic scholars played key roles in the development of eugenic research targeting the minorities as scientific objects. Within this logic, most of the minorities were, despite the predominance of white skin colour, racialised as belonging to a non-Nordic race, thus positioning them as alien to the alleged white Nordic race and culture (Kyllingstad 2017). In this article, we understand whiteness as more than a skin color or phenotype. As Dankertsen and Kristiansen (2021) explains, it is a political and cultural term that signifies status, power, and identity, and must be seen as ontologically real in its lived consequences through racism.

Research has pointed out how the legacies and presence of race and racism have been treated with externalisation and ignorance in Norway in general (Bangstad 2015; Kyllingstad 2017; A. H. Midtbøen 2022), and educational discourses in particular

(Fylkesnes 2019; Fylkesnes, du Plessis, and Massao 2024; Harlap and Riese 2023; Svendsen 2014). Kyllingstad (2017) argues that while scientific racism was delegitimised in Norwegian science and politics during the second half of the 20th century, this was not paralleled by the rise of an academic discourse about race as a social construction, in contrast to, for example, the US. Rather, Norway constructed itself as ‘post-racial’, and the decline of race was replaced by an increased usage of ethnicity. ‘Ethnic Norwegian’ is now commonly used in everyday language and research as a flexible term that refers to ideas about biological ancestry or whiteness, without being stated explicitly.

Externalisation of racism from the national self-understanding can be understood in the context of discourses of Nordic exceptionalism, upholding Nordic states as infallible democracies. In the Norwegian context, this manifests through the long-standing sanctioned ignorance of Norway’s participation in the transatlantic slave trade as well as colonisation of Sápmi (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012). The construction of such national imaginary is embedded in an affective economy where being Norwegian is seen as equivalent to being white (Eriksen and Stein 2022). Related is the notion by scholars that the analytical apparatus related to race, whiteness, and coloniality is not relevant or applicable in the Nordics. This has led to a poorly developed analytical apparatus that further complicates researching racism (Dankertsen and Kristiansen 2021).

Due to the Black Lives Matter-movement, there has been an increased visibility of antiracist discourses in the Norwegian public (Andersson 2025; Banafsheh, Ellefsen, and Sandberg 2024). This also includes efforts towards anti-racist education and curriculum in schools. However, these discourses commonly position antiracism as a new phenomenon associated with recent increase in immigration from Africa and Asia. This understanding upholds ignorance of the long-standing anti-racist critiques in the Nordics, such as the decolonial resistance from national minorities and Sámi thinkers back to the early 1900s (Svendsen 2021) and therefore runs the risk of repositioning both racism and anti-racism as foreign phenomenon. We argue that the interface between national exceptionalism, the absence of a racial vocabulary and an uninterrupted norm of whiteness make the racism experienced by national minorities particularly complex to analyse. We return to this in consideration of our empirical material and analysis towards the end of the article.

Findings: narratives and navigations

We exist, we are present, and we are diverse

All our participants were students in school after national minorities were explicitly included as a topic in the curriculum. Many stated that they nevertheless learned very little about national minorities in general, as well as their own groups. However, the experiences differed slightly in relation to context. In places where a national minority culture is deeply embedded in local history and geography, such as the Kven in the North and Forest Finns in the South-East, participants reported more covering of their groups’ cultures and histories. This teaching usually did not mention neither the name of the group nor the national minority category explicitly, as such local presence is intertwined with legacies of prejudice and shame, also among members within these groups themselves. Further, those who learnt about their own locally situated group rarely learnt

about other national minorities, suggesting that the topic was related to local history rather than systematic knowledge about national minorities in accordance with the curriculum. Nevertheless, a young Kven teacher reflected on the differences in teaching as she stated that locally we ‘do [Kven] culture, while nationally they learn about Kven’ in school. A few participants mentioned a fairly recent development with teachers not being locally born and hence less familiar with (the history of) local pupils belonging to various minorities as a reason for ignorance.

Despite these local variations, the main and collective message from the participants was the modest request that they want their co-citizens in Norway to *be aware that they actually exist*. They explicitly addressed what they perceived as a continued invisibilization in society and school, as well as in anti-racist discourses. This was described in a very concrete way by a young Roma woman, who narrates her experience with a teacher actively ignoring teaching about Roma history and language:

We are depicted in some of the books. Why can't they teach about us? When people have knowledge about you, they might not judge you in that way [...] In school, I had a social studies book with some pages about Roma. But the teacher just turned the page and skipped it.

She tells us that she is currently working with supporting Roma students in primary schools, mostly related to language support for the students with Romanés as the first or only language. She describes how her own experiences from school have made her raise her voice in the schools she works in, so that ‘now they are talking about this in first grade there’.

Such experiences with invisibilization were not only related to explicit ignorance like the Roma woman described, but also to how mentioning of the groups was done in ways that made them appear mythical and distant. A Kven participant argued that teaching about national minorities should ‘put a face’ on the groups. Many stressed that their lives and history should not be seen as something of the past, but as a living reality in present-day society. Hence, their narratives confirmed a recent finding in a study of Norwegian textbooks in social studies (years 1–10) that revealed that while the national minorities are featured in sections typically dealing with contemporary topics such as diversity, the texts mainly cover their past history (Banik [forthcoming](#)). A Jewish teacher stated that ‘my children should be seen in school’, while another participant stated that even though most children today do not have Jewish classmates, they may ‘later meet a Jew’ and that the presence of Jews [in Norway] then may not come as a shock. Thus, in textbooks, it remains unclear who the national minorities are today, and what role they play in society. Insisting on being portrayed as protagonists in Norwegian history as well as society today, participants also spoke back to common narratives of minorities as victims or passive observers. Importantly, the participants’ messages of presence and existence confirm that knowledge about the groups remains scarce.

As Norwegian official statistics do not include ethnicity or religious affiliation, there are no official figures on how many people belong to any of the national minorities. Estimates are small, also compared with other minorities in Norway, such as those of Pakistani or Turkish descent. For some of our participants the small numbers implied a sense of obligation to be outspoken about their background for others to learn. For others, the small numbers made them scared to stand out or being different. A young Jewish participant stated that ‘as 14 years old you are afraid that they [classmates] will not

like you because you are Jewish'. Another clear message was the call for knowledge that emphasises present-day diversity within the groups. Some participants argued that celebrations of national days such as April 8th for Roma and Romani/Taters are insufficient and may function as a way of upholding a multicultural image in the school, despite not including the groups during the rest of the year. The scepticism may also be related to how the dates commemorate important events of the past rather than present lives. However, they did not consider their past irrelevant. One participant stated that their background simply contributed to an understanding of 'who they are' today – a part of their current identity. Further, they also emphasised the complexity of being of such a background and simultaneously Norwegian – and the desire for the majority population to understand the complexity and emotional work. A middle-aged Forest Finn teacher stated that that he simply wanted to make the children 'proud of their Forest Finn belonging in the present'.

One middle-aged Forest Finn participant strongly disliked what she described as the Forest Finn museum's emphasis on a mythical and shamanistic past – clearly preferring what she defined as a 'rational approach' to history. A young Kven teacher had debated with herself for a long time to what extent she also should emphasise the troubled aspects of being Kven in teaching or stick to a stringent and positive story. As she explained, on the one hand, a positive narrative could contribute to elevating existing prejudices against Kven. On the other hand, the former would probably resonate with many of the family stories of Kven pupils. A solely positive story could therefore be equally alienating and hence contribute to a feeling that their family is not 'properly Kven'. The Jewish informants differed vastly as to what extent their Jewishness was experienced as based on religion, ethnicity, or a combination. A young Jewish participant referred to a film depicting orthodox Norwegian Jewish life often used in teaching when she stated that:

... what I think I was longing for was for them [the viewers/her classmates] to understand that not everybody was like that ... that these are the rules, these are the holidays, this is how everybody do it ... even within our family we practice differently.

Here she emphasised that the vast majority of Norwegian Jews do not follow orthodox practice, but that common teaching in schools often constructs that impression through the chosen representations.

Let us be proud and tell our own stories!

Despite ambiguities in being a spokesperson for their group in school, all participants in different ways expressed pride in an identity that they feel make them special whilst also claiming acknowledgement for being Norwegian. As one Roma described it: '[we are] ordinary Norwegians, just like everyone else'. Many emphasise the cultures' and groups' contributions to Norwegian history and society, and that these contributions are often ignored when collective national history is portrayed. One of the Forest Finn participants spoke of how their group historically has been recognised by endurance in physical work, being creative in getting by in areas with meagre natural resources. A key facet in their identity formation is the Forest Finn tradition of slash-and-burn farming. This is highlighted by many in their stories about Forest Finn identity, pointing out the sorrow in

being invisible in the history curriculum. As one of the older Forest Finn participants explains:

What is missing, are all the elements in our history that are not told. That is dramatic. [...] It is important to learn about each minority in itself, but it needs to be integrated in the Norwegian history. Norwegian history is not only Norwegian, but it has also always been diverse, so it is unfair that this is not communicated.

We understand this statement as a way of speaking back to the narratives of victimization that is often overemphasised in textbooks and teaching overall.

As studies of experienced racism in Norwegian schools indicate, being a visible minority in the classroom comes with the risk of reinforcing prejudice and being exposed to racist comments, especially during the time your group is thematised in lectures (UNICEF 2022). Previous studies of minority children within school context often focus on the challenge of being overtly visible, and always treated as the expert on your group, termed the 'burden of representation' (Eidsvik 2022; Nadim 2017). This phenomenon points to how assigned representation often comes with the pressure and expectation to be a representative of the whole group. There were several examples of this in our material, as a young Kven woman explained:

There was very little talk about Kvens in school. When it was, I was always singled out. I remember once that my grandmother had baked a Kven cake, and I remember being so nervous about the others not liking it, it was super embarrassing.

Kven culture and language is an integrated part of local histories and culture in many places, especially in Sápmi/Northern Norway, often in combination with the Sámi culture. However, because of shame and oppression, this has often been a silenced and not-spoken-about or repressed presence (Stubberud 2024). These factors make it particularly vulnerable to be singled out explicitly as Kven in the local context. For the above cited woman, the position as a representative was not chosen, but a result of her parents being engaged in local organizations working for Kven rights. This happened a decade ago. However, now there is a growing recognition and pride related to Kven identity, not at least due to the TRC. Many are reclaiming their Kven identities in more articulated ways. A slightly older female Kven teacher, had, based on her own experiences, developed teaching strategies for being sensitive to children with similar processes as herself, as she explains:

It is not always easy to know your identity as a young person. That goes for all identity markers. Not easy. But being in the frontline of working with visibility for a minority can be heavy. When I prepare lectures for children, I do not want them to impose identities on children. It is hard being a poster child. And maybe being told that you are responsible for saving the culture. Therefore, I use my own story instead, and the students do not have to say that they are Kven. But they are invited, if they want, through my example.

This narrative reveals how the teacher applies her own experiences with the challenges of being 'singled out' as a minority as a resource in her teaching, showing care for the new generation of students. Related is another Kven's aim when teaching Kven children: 'everybody should be allowed to be proud of the culture, history and cultural heritage that have contributed to defining you'. These strategies reflect how minority teachers often

serve as compensators of a school system lacking multicultural and anti-racist competencies (Magaldi, Conway, and Trub 2016).

As literature and previous research often focus on the ‘burden of representation’, the fact that the dominant narrative of pride when being acknowledged for your identity in classrooms, was a surprising find. In our material, these narratives were more common than those expressing experiences of shame. As our sample included participants with an explicit wish to talk about their identities, their experiences of pride may not be representative of the groups. However, it is still interesting to explore how pride is experienced and operationalised in their narratives and actions. The Kven teacher uses her pride as a professional resource in her teaching and insists on her right and competencies to narrate her own story. Our Roma informant expressed how proud she was when her teacher asked her to talk about the Roma in class. ‘I don’t like to talk about me, but when it comes to our culture, I aim to demonstrate that I am proud of it, not embarrassed’. When a young Jewish woman with learning disabilities was invited to talk about her Jewishness in class, she stated that ‘this was my time to shine’ and that was a ‘good feeling’.

Despite sometimes being singled out, most participants reported that their cultures were either absent or presented in superficial and derogatory manners in textbooks. This made many see themselves as responsible for being knowledge bearers and resources, opposing the common stock stories (cf. D’Arcy 2017). As demonstrated above, some of the participants talk about the importance of involvement from parents coming to school as something that made them feel proud. Others also talk about the importance of the teacher, such as a Roma woman, who previously had quite harsh experience with exclusion at school:

When I started secondary school, there were quite a lot of changes. I was very lucky. My aunts had a teacher, and I got the same teacher, and she knew about our background, and she came to our house . . . Best teacher. Knew all about what we have been through. Had her in social studies. She mentioned Roma in her teaching. And then I was so proud, really proud, when she did that. She also asked me to talk about Roma. I had to teach the class and explain it When it comes to my culture, I want to show that I’m proud of it, not embarrassed.

The importance of involvement and acknowledgement from parents and teachers who help make the situation feel safe, is a recurring aspect. The significance of this seems to depend upon being prepared, rather than spontaneously asked or singled out. Participants insist on highlighting pride rather than shame through their narratives. However, this notion is also related to being involved and having control over the timing, context, and terms their identities are highlighted in the classroom. The narratives in our material also reveal how, when done in a good way and supported by a sense of security and care from significant adults, this can be an important resource for knowledge about the national minorities in the classroom.

Negotiating complex landscapes of racism, othering, and ignorance

Although several participants talked of experiences with what we understand as prejudice, stereotyping, and in some cases quite harsh or violent racism, the concept of racism was hardly mentioned. In our sample, the Roma and Jew participants stood out in this regard, as also illustrated by our opening story. Participants from these groups

reported racism as experienced both directly and verbally, and in terms of being excluded by friends because of their background. A young Jewish woman recalls the shock as a child when some unknown older boys from her school once drove past her, rolled down the window and out of nowhere shouted ‘fucking Jew!’. A Roma woman of approximately the same age explains:

I was bullied a lot. It started around 4th or 5th grade. I knew that if I said I was Roma, I would be bullied. I rather said I came from India, and at another school I attended, I said I was Spanish. One day, someone found out I was Roma, and then suddenly friends disappeared. I was not allowed in my school friends’ houses, and no one wanted to play with me during recess. Once, a classmate tried to push me into the road, in front of a car . . .

The experience of being subject to explicit and blatant exclusion, and particularly how peers sought to escape their proximity, was also reported among the Jew participants, hence making the school inherently an unsafe place. In contrast, one Roma who briefly attended a Roma school abroad spoke warmly about how safe she felt: ‘The school was a safe place where Roma children like me could come . . . and I could be myself’. Interestingly, several of the Jewish and Roma participants state that as they have become older, their tolerance for racist remarks has decreased and that they more systematically speak back.

Another dimension of the exposure to racism was how the ignorance of teachers related to the importance of being sensitive to minority students’ risk of re-traumatisation when teaching about racism led to serious consequences for some students. A young Jewish student had to leave class when they watched a film featuring right wing extremism, as she could not bear listening to the neo-Nazis explaining ‘why they hated Jews so much’. Another young Jewish woman explains that her family’s Holocaust past still was present in her life:

I have grown up in fear of something happening, that someone might hurt or kill me because I am me, it can’t be escaped. [...] I had a lot of lectures about Holocaust in school, but I often had to leave. I became sick and unwell. In the movies, when you sit there, you imagine your own family, what can happen . . .

Among the Kven participants, the underlying racist legacies and structures were present in more subtle and implicit manners. As explained by Stubberud (2024), the Norwegianisation politics and the corresponding ethnic revitalisation movements among the Kven and the Sámi have led to a ‘messy’ landscape of categories and axis of identifications in Sápmi/Northern Norway. The Kven participants in our study, due to our methodological approach and modes of recruitment, all had firm and explicitly stated identities as Kven. They in different ways included Norwegian, and for some also Sámi, as relevant aspects of their identities. As Stubberud (2024) describes, among the older generations in parts of Sápmi, what is now understood as ethnic identities were not necessarily articulated but rather interwoven in everyday practices. One reason for this might be the shame imposed on such categories during Norwegianisation. Another is the fact that such categorizations do not necessarily always play an important role in peoples’ lived realities. Emphasis of such categorizations may also be strengthened both by state policies and rights-based movements based on constructions of group identities for recognition purposes. This may help explain why the explicit categorizations may be more important to the younger generations.

Thus, the struggles for recognition of the Sámi and the Kven have also reinforced borders between the groups related to complex and locally embedded dynamics of racism, exclusion, and shame. With the increase in Kven presence with immigration from Finland (then a part of Russia) in the 18th century, Kven were commonly ranked higher in the racial hierarchy in Norway. The government regarded the Kven as well-suited workers in the emerging Northern industries and farming (Berg-Nordlie 2024). With increased scepticism towards a territorial expanding Russia, negative attitudes towards the Kven increased, questioning their loyalties towards the Norwegian state. Further, the tensions caused by differences in the ethno-political revitalization movements among the Sámi and Kven also led to increased tensions between these categorizations (Stubberud 2024). As a young Kven woman explained:

The identity as Kven has come to have a larger relevance over the past years, as I have understood more about how it is outside our family. I have always been aware that my family is Kven, but this has been something we did at home, someone we were at home. Not in society. But over the past years it has become something else – a part of my identity I also express outside the inner circles. But it is still a process – it is hard to explain [...] I think this is the situation for many Kvens right now. ‘The Kven spring’, that more Kven projects are happening, the start-up of the Kven theatre . . .

Among our participants, the narratives of the Forest Finns differ from the others, as they do not report explicit experiences related to racism. An older man who has been active in organizations working with Forest Finn history describes how he has experienced an upsurge of people over the last years who search for a Forest Finn ancestry and claim it on quite weak terms, as it has ‘become fashionable’. A younger Forest Finn woman explains why she thinks there is less racism towards Forest Finns: ‘It might be because, so few know what it [the Forest Finn culture] is. Racism is based on ideas that do not correspond to reality, but when you do not even know that Forest Finns exist . . .’. As the above referenced population survey confirms, one third of the Norwegian population report never having heard about Forest Finns (NIM 2022). A related explanation for the relative absence of racist experiences can also paradoxically be how Norwegianisation has been ‘successful’ in this regard, as the Forest Finn language, culture, and traditions were for a large part eliminated. While the above-mentioned young Forest Finn also speaks a sense of loss as she discovered her Forest Finn family background only as a young adult, she is quick to point out that ‘those before us are the ones that really suffered’.

Discussion and implications

Beyond Black and White: racism as an elusive and uninterrupted presence

The participants’ narratives highlight a tension that we argue is key to understanding reproduction of racism and whiteness in present-day Norway. Most participants insist on being a rightful part of the Norwegian community by placing their ancestors’ contributions to the culture and historical progress of Norwegian society. However, they also navigate an axis of invisibility and otherness in relation to an unmarked norm of being acknowledged as a proper Norwegian citizen, for many triggered by the ‘outing’ of their positionalities within the national minority categories. When we analyse these dynamics in relation to the poorly developed analytical vocabulary on racism in Norway, we see

how this situation poses a risk for further ignorance of the particular racism experienced by the national minorities.⁴

Partly mirroring the backlashes against CRT in the UK and the US (see Gillborn 2024), CRT has been met with extensive pushbacks and refusal in Norwegian academia. Although this positions Norway's alleged 'post-racial' society and its educational institutions firmly inside the global workings of race and racism (cf. Fylkesnes, du Plessis, and Massao 2024), these dynamics take on contextual shapes. As the critiques of CRT in Norway attempts to externalise it as an alleged 'US import' (Eriksen 2021), this is problematic not only because of the risk of these perspectives being expelled from the analytical toolbox in research on racism in Norway as such. It may also lead to a segmentation of the misunderstanding that whiteness theory mainly addresses racism related to the 'black and white' dynamics as particular for the historical situation in the US, and whiteness as reduced to skin colour (for an example of how Jewish experiences are dismissed and labelled 'white', see Matias 2012). This may also help explain while the Jewish and Roma participants described quite violent and explicit racism, they were reluctant to apply the term about their experiences.

We see such limited understanding of whiteness reproduced in parts of the research on racism in Norway emerging over the recent years (e.g. Døving 2022). Racism towards national minorities, including anti-Roma attitudes and antisemitism, is hardly mentioned. Racism is mainly discussed in contexts of 'new immigration' marked by the presence of brown and black bodies. This mirrors findings in D'Arcy (2017, 64) description of the ignorance of anti-Roma in the UK, where traveller communities continue to face discrimination but are simultaneously excluded from general inequality discourse and policy documentation, as they pass as white to the observer. These insights also have consequences for the overall understandings of racism as integral to the societal structures and histories in Norway and the Nordics, as well as racism experienced by other groups, such as non-white immigrants. When whiteness is simply understood in terms of skin colour, racism may be understood as contained by visibly brown and black bodies. A related consequence is that people of immigrant backgrounds speaking up about the racism they experience are blamed for introducing the problem through their mere presence as racism is constructed as external and 'imported'. As some of our participants narrate how they navigate their option to 'pass as white', this can also be understood as a way of avoiding being affiliated with racism. Thus, the Kven teachers' reference to the sensitivity concerning being open about Kven identity may be understood as a strategy to avoid being positioned as non-white – or not properly Norwegian.

Despite the attempts to label CRT as irrelevant, whiteness as unmarked majority position has a long history in Norway. It is intimately interconnected with ideals of Norwegianness, in which the Sámi and the national minorities historically worked as images of alien others vis-à-vis the construction of the alleged Nordic race (Kyllingstad 2017). The narratives of our participants exemplify how these structures of white normativity are experienced in and through their navigations of identity and belonging. While most pass as white, the participants also in different ways express how revealing their identities as belonging to one of the national minorities jeopardizes their acknowledgement as Norwegian. In the case of Jews and Roma, they risk a positioning as disposable. These dynamics may also be seen as what the participants in our study speak back to, when they emphasise

the acknowledgement as rightful Norwegians as key for experiencing recognition, as well as a source of identity and pride. Gillborn (2021) highlights how markers like skin tone are imbued with meaning through social processes, which then become tools for exclusion and hierarchy that may work in subtle and invisible ways.

As Svendsen (2022, 44) points out, a key facet of CRT is the notion that structures and practices may have racist effects without race being explicitly part of the intentions behind such dynamics, and thus they remain uninterrupted. These dynamics may help explain why the experienced racism of Sámi and National minorities are often excluded from the overall discussions on racism in Norway today (Berg-Nordlie 2022), and why the participants in our study seem reluctant to name their experiences by applying racism as term. To a striking extent, our material mirrors the historical legacy of racism in Norway by the fact that the Roma and Jews most explicitly express experiences of being positioned as disposable. In the history of Norwegianisation policies, the Sámi, Kven and Forest Finns were more often positioned as subjects that could be 'saved' as proper citizens through assimilation – resembling the US policies of 'kill the Indian in him and save the man' (Wolfe 2006). The Jews, Roma and Romani/Tater were to a larger extent seen as disposable, and subject to harsher eugenic measures and outright exclusion. Several of the participants with these backgrounds spoke of efforts to hide their identities, and when they are revealed, they are exposed to racism questioning their right to even be present. The most explicit image of this is the example narrated by the Roma woman being pushed in front of a car when her identity was revealed.

Based on our analysis, we argue the need for a more fine-grained analytical apparatus and proper historical contextualization concerning racism and whiteness in Norway. We see how denials of analytical perspectives such as CRT represents a doubled-edged dismissal of racism that hits the national minorities in particular ways: As such perspectives are seen as external to Norway, racism is not acknowledged as a present-day nor historical reality in Norwegian society. Additionally, the dismissal of whiteness obscures the racism experienced by minorities that may pass as white in terms of skin color, but that are racialised as 'others' in relation to normative whiteness as social construction (cf. Gillborn 2021).

While a superficial application of US-constructed whiteness theory may lead to an overt focus on racism as a question of skin-color or be limited to black and white-dynamics, a dominant focus on the specifics of antisemitism, anti-Roma attitudes or anti-samism may paradoxically also lead to further exclusion of these groups from the larger discussion on racist structures in Norwegian society, or even position it as something *other than racism* (Lauritzen 2023). We therefore strongly oppose a conceptualisation reducing any form of racism to something else, or, as has been the case in some discourses on antisemitism,⁵ prioritises certain kinds as more significant. Racism has a common genealogy with global ramifications but is manifested in different and contextual manners. We do think that a precise analytical apparatus will help to better capture the particularities of how racism is experienced. Anti-Roma further seems to stand out as a particularly accepted form of racism in the Norwegian society, as documented by a recent national survey (NIM 2022). In this background, it may be necessary to apply the concept to properly 'see' these forms of racism.

Implications for education and teaching – positive encounters and the power of defining your own stories

The participants' experiences of and visions for education have implications for how to conceptualise and conduct anti-racist teaching, and of teaching with, for and about minority groups. All participants mentioned the importance of teaching Norwegian history in a way that makes visible its racist and colonial legacies, and in particular the Norwegianisation politics and its consequences. Knowledge about these parts of history is important in relation to the democratic and anti-racist mandate of the Norwegian school, but also for understanding the minorities' lived realities today. This resonates with the TRC. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Norway (2023), which describes a reconciled democratic community as one that has a shared understanding of history and thus highlights knowledge about Norwegianisation and injustice towards minorities in history.

However, the participants' narratives mostly take shape as counter-stories, speaking back to injustice through insisting on pride in their identities and cultures. This pride is for many embedded in how the cultures of the different minority groups form part of the collective Norwegian history and society. Further, the common tendency of portraying the minorities only as victims of Norwegianisation, assimilation, and genocide in textbooks and teaching does not contribute to emphasizing diversity. Internal diversity in the groups is something that is highlighted through the participants' narratives, related to a desire of being seen as an individual person and not reduced to a narrowly defined group identity.

The participants' narratives correspond to what Toft (2021) described as the significance of positive encounters and alternative schemas in education that aim at countering prejudice. Based on insights from, among others, Gordon Allport (1954), Toft argues that our minds use cognitive schemas as simplified mental 'packages' to quickly sort and categorise things, including people. These schemas often contain stereotypes, which are established ideas about groups generalised to individuals, and they are strengthened through activation and association. This implies that if the teacher directly challenges or discusses specific stereotypes, there is a risk of reinforcing the associative connection to that stereotype with the students even if the teacher actively refutes it. Toft (2019) found that the common use of controversial examples portrayed in the media used to engage students worked to establish stereotypical and essentialising discourses of Islam and Muslims, even as the intentions were the opposite. A related study investigating Norwegian teachers' perspectives on Sámi history and societies found that while the teachers were able to recognise the stereotypes and hold high levels of critical reflexivity, they lacked the cultural and historical knowledge to counter the stereotypes and stock stories (Eriksen 2025). As the narratives in this study inform, although knowledge about the 'dark sides' of history is key, teaching must also emphasise everyday lived realities, and a diversity of examples related to the minority groups to help establish what Toft (2021) refers to as alternative schemas (see also Dovidio, Eller, and Hewstone 2011 for an literature review on how direct, as well as indirect and extended, contact may improve intergroup relations). In this sense, the use of counter-stories and CRM can also be turned into a didactical resource.

A main obstacle when providing alternative schemas is the fact that there is a lack of updated textbooks and teaching materials available. We see from the participants' narratives that they may represent major resources in teaching, through their experience-based knowledge. However, there is a real risk of leaving the burden of anti-racist education on the groups and individuals that are most vulnerable themselves, amounting to a double burden. The participants' narratives indicate that the experience of preparedness, feeling of ownership and definitional power are keys for minorities' contributions in the classroom. Feelings of pride and safety in sharing one's own identity and stories were closely connected to establishing a relation with the teacher and controlling how this is done. Some underlined that they 'only represented themselves' and that they constituted one of many ways of being a Kven, Romani/Tater, Forest Finn, Roma, or Jew. It is also vital that the inclusion of representatives from the minority groups themselves is not seen as a substitute for the teachers' responsibility. The work with making visible lived realities, diversity and providing alternative schemas can also be done with other means, such as inviting speakers from organizations, visiting museums and cultural sights, or engaging with literature, film, or art produced by members of the groups. This does however demand a prioritisation of the topics. Starting from the stories of the minorities themselves appears as a key strategy for the joint task of creating educational practices that enable acknowledgement for students from the minorities, and anti-racist education for all.

Notes

1. The reference to genocide here relates to how the Norwegian state and governmental officers were complicit in sending Jews and Roma to death camps during the Holocaust.
2. As category, Sámi encompasses a diversity of different groups, communities, and languages, having in common a shared cultural heritage and relation to the geographical area of Sápmi. Sápmi stretches across the now nation state borders between Norway, Sweden, Finland, and North-Western Russia, but were present in the areas far before the borders were established. All have been subject to colonial and assimilationist policies carried out by the emerging nation states.
3. The mandate of the committee only included the Saami, Kven and Forest Finns. Protests were raised by activists and organizations amongst the Roma and Romani/Tater, who felt left out and overlooked through this process.
4. This also goes for the indigenous Saami, but as explained above, the Saami hold status as indigenous and are thus not included in our research on the National minorities. However, the case of the Saami must be seen in relation with the National minorities, and particularly the Kven, as the histories of the Saami and the Kven during Norwegianisation and its aftermath are deeply intertwined in the geographical and historical context of Northern Norway/Sápmi. Furthermore, as more research from the Norwegian context is done on these questions concerning the Saami, we position our discussion in dialogue with these writings.
5. We also strongly oppose understandings of antisemitism that conflates antisemitism with critiques of the state of Israel. However, in the case of school children and individual Jews in Norway, we see that the actions of the Israeli state towards Palestine make them more exposed to antisemitism regardless of their political standpoints.

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ORCID

Kristin Gregers Eriksen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8240-2163>

Vibeke Kieding Banik  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9731-6380>

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