



Roma Young People's Perception of Intelligence and their Experience of Education

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Abstract

Roma young people are often subjected to oppression within formal educational spaces often linked to the idea that Roma young people are less intelligent than other young people. Intelligence is understood in the positionality of individual ideologies and could become a tool of powerful individuals and groups to create an 'ideology of normal' that grants permission to exclude Roma young people. This 'normal' view of intelligence can impact educational experiences. This study takes a phenomenological approach, using focus groups and diaries to explore what Roma young people perceive to be intelligence and how this perception could affect their education experiences including their motivation to engage in learning. The data exposes the oppressive culture Roma young people exist in and how racist ideologies of intelligence impact learning and wider opportunities. Roma young people from this study express a desire to achieve academically but value qualities, such as kindness and respect, which are perceived as intelligent behaviour. The study concludes that a recognition of the impact of professional relationships, such as youth work, is significant to challenge oppressive intelligence ideologies.

Keywords Intelligence · Roma · Racism · Motivation · Learning · Youth work

Introduction

During World War II, Eva Justin studied Roma children and summarised that Roma are not intelligent and would blight society with unintelligent behaviour such as prostitution and theft; her research findings condemned Roma for ethnic cleansing and sterilisation (Barth et al. 2005). Research continues to suggest poor attainment of Roma young people in education and low intelligence scores (Greason and Shallice 2017; Dolean and Călugăr 2020; Cox 2012). However, these studies

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were arguably completed in a specific social context and ideology of intelligence, impacted by racist attitudes towards Roma young people (Fernández 2021; O'neils 2010; Tourtouras et al. 2016). The idea of racial differences and pre-suppositions of intelligence continues to be a current debate; Cofnas (2020) argued that genetic variants underpin intelligence. People in power can perpetuate ideologies of intelligence and affect the educational journey of young people (Warren et al. 2009; Fairclough 2014; Richardson 2017).

Young people may adopt or reject the powerful ideologies of intelligence, especially those linked to specific traits, like ethnicity, gender and ability, but their self-perception of their intelligence can affect their attitude towards learning (Sellars 2017; Wenzel and Reinhard 2019). This paper aims to understand what Roma Young People define as intelligence and intelligent behaviour, within the debate on the power of intelligence ideologies that can lead to oppression of vulnerable communities. Recognising the impact of ideologies on intelligence can enable individuals to challenge oppression and create a greater cohesive educational environment.

Intelligence as a Tool to 'Other'

Said (2003) suggests that powerful individuals' 'other' people who do not match their ideology of normal. This paper debates that an individual's ideological position of intelligence has an impact on that individual and how they interact with others. Belton (2010) argues that this process, of a power group or individual forcing an ideology of normal and normal behaviour, is the 'colonisation' of groups, such as Roma. Bhabha (1992 cited in Childs and Williams 1997) argues that this helps provide a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them' and allows a hierarchy of superiority. This has been demonstrated through the ideology of intelligence, where intelligence has been used as a tool to demonstrate ethnic superiority throughout decades of research (Sani 2019; Gilman 2008; Goodenough 1926). An individual's ideology of intelligence and intelligent behaviour will be impacted by their culture and society. Movement into new societies can impact ideologies of intelligence. Individuals might consider themselves intelligent within their family group, but this might change when engaging with peers, teachers, places of worship and wider society. Those within the academic society will formulate their ideologies of intelligence and could seek research that promotes those ideologies. Efforts to reduce bias in research are continually developed, but individuals' values and prejudices can still impact research conclusions (Paluck et al. 2021).

Spearman identified a general intelligence, linked to mental ability, 'g' (Sternberg 1997). Sternberg's concept of 'g' linked it to the ability to completing tasks to be successful in everyday life (IQ) (Sternberg and Kaufman 2011). The term 'everyday life' and the term 'success' are subjective, leaving professionals to establish their definitions and expectations, often leading to an ethnic-centric and cultural understanding, labelling some groups as less intelligent than others (Claxton 2001). Sternberg's value base led to the evolution of the concept of intelligence to consider more cultural 'success' by identifying Mozart as intelligent (Sternberg 1999). Gardner (2006) agreed with Sternberg's cultural approach in his theory of 'multiple

intelligences', suggesting that abilities show intelligence such as music or art; however, this concept was not new as many years before Confucius' (cited in Higgins 2006) ideology of intelligence was ability based, praising the skill of archery and horse riding as intelligence, suggesting that intelligence was viewed as what was considered valuable by these individuals. Gardner's values are also highlighted when he suggests that the height of intelligence is the "Graduate student and the professor" (Claxton 2001:62). Goleman (1995) developed his concept of emotional intelligence (EQ), as he wondered why some individuals tested high on IQ tests but were not 'successful in life'. Weare (2004) challenged the concept of EQ, suggesting that emotion was linked to culture and place, and that different cultures express their emotions differently. Goleman's (1995:192) prejudices are also exposed when he suggests if young people developed EQ, they would be 'less rude, more popular and make better decisions about drugs and sex'. Young people are often viewed as unintelligent due to undertaking risky activities, often resulting in moral panics around young people's activities (Bach et al. 2020; Tomova et al. 2021).

The Roma Community

Intelligence as a concept has led to classifying people, ultimately to those who have less and those who have more. This is seen in Binet's (cited in Sellars 2017) 'Bell Curve' of IQ intelligence which labelled those with less IQ as "Idiots and Morons". This labelling has been prevalent against the Roma community. Slobodnikova and Randolph-Seng (2020:152) describe the Roma community as "the most marginalized and discriminated ethnic group in Europe". This led to the Roma community being on the fringes of society and experiencing more "violence, discrimination, segregation, poor education, undeserved housing conditions and health care". Miconi et al. (2021:577) add that the community "Face multiple challenges, such as barriers to education, poor integration, discrimination, marginalization, and poverty". Patache and Neguriță (2020) state that due to poor treatment, Roma will often be reluctant to self-identify, especially in places and spaces of education. Due to the multiple challenges faced by the community, Roma educational outcomes are often highlighted as poor. Roma children are said to experience difficulty when moving into secondary education often related to poor parental education (Mrhálek et al. 2022) and are more likely to drop out of school and actively discouraged from engaging in higher education (Patache and Neguriță 2020). Slobodnikova and Randolph-Seng (2020:153) highlight that "only 21% of Roma males and 15% of Roma females complete their secondary education". Slobodnikova and Randolph-Seng (2020:153) comment that these poor outcomes are because Roma "refuse to adapt in the school environment", but others highlight the lack of school adapting, accepting and working in a multi-cultural way that includes Roma heritage (Patache and Neguriță 2020; Miconi et al. 2021). Additionally, more cultural factors affect outcomes such as social exclusion and isolation (Mrhálek et al. 2022). These multiple aspects of oppression on the community can result in wider negative social elements, with poor behaviour, bullying, risk-taking

activities and increased social stigma (Dietrich and Ferguson 2020). The negative social and physical environment Roma are in can impact an individual's perception of their intelligence leading to a lack of motivation to engage in education and seek educational opportunities (Sellars 2017; Asrar-ul-Haq et al. 2017; Spinath et al. 2006).

Research suggests that Roma has low IQ (Bakalar 2004) and low EQ (Comanescu and Ciorbea 2014). Comanescu and Ciorbea (2014) state the Roma community does not integrate into formal educational settings. Dietrich and Ferguson (2020:314) state that "students can be taught to assert themselves in positive and pro-social ways or to adopt a growth mindset about their own intelligence". Flynn (2007) and Petty (2009) have both discussed that individuals can be trained to succeed in IQ testing. Goleman (1995:79) supports this by suggesting that individuals who can motivate themselves to do better are intelligent:

"Studies of Olympic athletes, world-class musicians, and chess grandmasters find their unifying trait is the ability to motivate themselves to pursue relentless training routines."

However, these individuals engage in training with others—coaches, mentors, mental and physical health teams—so motivation may not therefore be linked to an individual's intelligence but linked to relationships. Miconi et al.'s (2021) research highlighted that Roma young people who had trusted adult relationships with community leaders was more engaged in their educational development, but that this experience was often rare to due to a lack of resources. While some relationships are beneficial, others can be negative. Agrusti and Corradi (2015) discuss the role of teachers in creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, as teachers view low attainment and make judgements on young people which affects their interaction with students negatively. Due to stigma, social exclusion and bullying, schools have been reported as unsafe spaces for Roma young people (Miconi et al. 2021). Youth workers can be seen as the antithesis of teachers, focusing on nonformal and informal education and working with young people 'where they are at'. Youth work promotes a holistic approach based on the needs of young people using activity and trusting professional relationships (Davies et al. 2015; De St Croix 2016; Davies 2024). However, youth workers are not immune to the development of negative attitudes towards individuals based on their ideologies of intelligent behaviour. Many Roma young people may experience these self-fulfilling prophecies and experience low aspirations and motivation as they are perceived as 'unintelligent', leading to internalised racism and reinforcing negative stereotypes (Henry and Williams 2015; Orton et al. 2021; Morgan et al. 2023).

Intelligence (in any of its measured forms) is social, as intelligence is always compared against others; is influenced by others' perception of intelligence; and involves ethical and cultural aspects (Williams and Conroy 2022; Zarrett et al. 2013; Lynn et al. 2018). Therefore, my research was designed to examine whether Roma young people have their own definition of intelligence, how others might have impacted that definition and how their understanding of intelligence impacts on their motivation to learn.

Research Methodology

This research is based on Roma young people living in Derby, UK. The majority of the Roma population are migrants from Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Miconi et al. (2021) highlight that the Roma community are an understudied group because they are ‘hard to reach’. This could be because researchers are not only seen as part of the perceived oppressive educational establishment, but also because researchers go through schools to access their participants for study. I have many years of experience working with Eastern European Roma communities and young people in Derby; during this time I have worked with multi-agency teams, employment agencies, health services, schools, youth clubs and community groups that work with and support Roma, this helped reduce the potential mistrust of myself as a researcher. I am not from the Roma Community, and as such this could be a potential barrier. To combat these issues, I engaged with the adult Roma community, many considered Elders of the community, who were highly supportive of the research and provided advice on the research methodology and purpose. For example, the adult Roma community highlighted that the word ‘Intelligence’ does not translate well as there is no single word for intelligence in the Roma Language. It was agreed to have the support of a Roma community worker to help support the delivery of a clear message and show community support for the research. Ethical approval was granted by a university ethics committee.

The sample was made up of 30 Eastern European Roma between the ages of 13 and 18 who were in full-time education and who lived within the local area of inner-city Derby. Roma in Derby are more likely to live in overcrowded accommodation, have low-skill jobs or be economically inactive, less likely to own their own home and are more commonly reporting bad health (Office for National Statistics 2024). The main wards where Roma young people live are the most disadvantaged nationally (Derby City Council 2021). The sample was recruited through the Roma adult community and local youth clubs where Roma young people attended. Participants who were not Roma, not in full-time education or outside of the age range were excluded from this study. All young people under the age of 18 had parental consent. Local Roma community organisers were used to help with any translation issues to make sure members of the community had a full understanding of the process and the right to withdraw.

Diaries and focus groups were used as methods of data collection. Diaries allowed participants to record experiences that happened throughout individuals’ days, which might not have been discussed in the focus group. It also allowed a more reflective space for participants; however, I was then reliant on participants to record this data (Duke 2012; Tedder 2013; Hyers 2018). Based on feedback from the participants, I combined a physical diary with an online platform. The online platform provided spell checking etc., but also was something young people were more familiar and comfortable with completing. Participants used both physical and digital forms to record data. Ten Roma young people were given physical diaries to complete, and three of these were returned; however, all ten

engaged in the online versions, and none of the participants engaged in the diaries in a daily fashion, but at ad hoc times or in response to prompts to participate. The ten who completed the diaries were also involved in the focus groups.

Focus groups were used to enable a collective experience and encourage the debate and sharing of a range of experiences and opinions (Cohen et al. 2018; Hopkins 2007; Gibbs 2013). The focus groups were designed to last about 45 min to allow discussion. Focus groups were held for the Roma young people at a local community park centre, which was a central location to the residency of the community and within easy reach of several schools in the area. These were recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed after the sessions. There were three focus groups conducted.

It was recognised that language could be an issue, as for most participants English is (at least) a third language; however, the young people all used English throughout the research. The research was conducted with a Roma community worker who was able to provide language support should it have been needed. Although they were not called on, young people felt more confident engaging in the research knowing they were there for that purpose (Nes et al. 2010; Henry and Williams 2015; Ozolins et al. 2020). The questions for the focus group were co-designed with the elders of the community, to help make sure any misunderstanding was reduced. The elders advised asking some closed questions to allow thinking space for the young people; we discussed how this might be problematic, so we incorporated a closed question with an open one. The delivery of questions was repeated and written down so participants could take time to respond.

Questions asked included the following:

- What is intelligence?
- What do intelligent people look like?
- Do you consider yourself to be intelligent and how do you know this?
- Do you think others consider you to be intelligent and what are the signs of this?

Flexibility in the research design was essential as the young people engaged in the research differently than originally planned (Kapiszewski et al. 2022; Hill et al. 2022). Due to the positive engagement with the Elders of the community, news of the research and encouragement to be involved spread by word of mouth very quickly, so instead of an expected drop-out, we received a significant increase in willing participants. Initially, 16–18-year-olds were targeted assuming they would have a better grasp of English, but several other young people wanted to become involved (and their parents supported this). Some young people needed prompting to engage with the diaries and would return these at different times, and some young people made contact outside of planned meetings which meant that additional focus groups were held. All focus groups were held within a 1-week window and were conducted ethically with young people's and parents' consent. The young people who were involved also invited local youth workers to be involved, as they had discussed many of their experiences with the youth workers and wanted them to communicate some of their experiences. To avoid a blurring of the data from the Roma young people, it was agreed to interview the youth workers separately.

A phenomenological approach was chosen as it records immediate experiences and gains an understanding of how and why participant's knowledge comes to be, often connected to social and cultural aspects of society. The phenomenological approach emphasises the lived experience to help reduce preconceived ideas and prejudice (Cohen et al. 2018; Williams 2021). The research was designed to provide a snapshot of the Roma young people's current experience, with the hope that more research can be done to examine the potential impact on educational practice. The data collected was qualitative and an inductive thematic analysis was made of the collected data from all sources. The focus groups were transcribed and checked by the Roma community worker to check for any clarification or potential misunderstandings. The core themes arising were developed and cross-referenced between the research tools. The themes were narrowed to see leading ideas, resulting in the four key themes below. The data findings were presented back to the participants, the community worker that supported for translation and the youth workers for discussion and feedback, and all supported the identified themes.

Results and Discussion

The thematic approach to the qualitative data allowed a narrowing down of the common concerns, issues and positives of the Roma young people's experiences.

The data produced four themes:

- Perception of intelligence
- Racism
- Personal responsibility and empowerment
- Relationships

Perception of Intelligence

Young people's perceptions of intelligence were generally framed within two ideologies: academic achievement and value-based practices. When asked directly about what intelligence is, participants responded with a range of answers including.

"Smart"

"Perfect"

"Dressing Good"

"Has A-levels"

"Good behaviour"

There were mixed definitions of intelligence, with some leaning towards an IQ ideology, based around qualifications and cognitive thinking. However, the idea of "dressing good" was about wearing good quality clothes, suggesting that someone intelligent is also wealthy; this supports the ideas of Sternberg (1999) and Goleman (1995) suggesting intelligence as success. The word "Perfect" was offered by two young people at the same time, indicating an ideology that intelligence was not a

sliding scale but instead is an (unreachable) destination. One young person commented that:

“Good behaviour is showing you have self-control, it shows you are a good person, that you can listen.”

This suggested the controlling of self and emotions, linked to EQ (Goleman 1995), but connected specifically to social interactions. The idea of intelligence being a ‘good person’ was clear in the data, suggesting that the young people’s ideology of intelligence was based more on values and attitude. Actions of intelligence were expressed as values.

Young Person 2: They always talk about good things.

Interviewer: What do you mean by good things?

Young Person 2: They don’t talk about school stuff, they talk about life, living, being kind and good.

Another young person commented:

“Intelligent people have a lot of respect. They are kind and lovely, like helping people, good at talking to people and get on with people. They have a nice heart” (Young Person 8).

Intelligence was not perceived to be a demonstration of cognitive ability but an attitude towards others. This ideology was also reflected in the young people’s approach to school, as the young people talked about not valuing learning about maths or science, but how they value learning how to treat each other and interact with each other. However, for these young people, their experience of ‘kindness’ was at home or with peers, not at school (see below); this may indicate why some young people choose not to engage in school and place a greater value on the family and home life first. This is supported by a Youth Worker:

“I think Roma prioritise family more than anything else... if someone’s sick at home, then people don’t go to school... If you add a values-based approach to things then community values are going to be maintained and learnt within that familial environment.”

Young people’s relationships with others are key in their development of values and ideologies (Keenan et al. 2016; Zarrett et al. 2013; Stets and Burke 2003). For example, when asked if learning happens outside of the classroom, the young people responded with very different opinions. Some young people considered learning to only take place in the classroom because “it is where the teacher teaches you”. The young people had adopted (maybe because this was their experience) a banking style of education (Freire 2017) and suggested learning only happened within a formal learning environment. However, others disagreed and talked about their wider learning by engaging in a non-formal learning environment, for example, the youth club, when asked what they learned at the club they commented on learning conversational and social skills, again the idea of “being good” was developed more in the youth club than the school environment, the young people commented on this more

and said that it was in this setting that they learned about respecting other people but also about dealing with their own emotions, many of the young people talked about having “anger issues” or feelings of “depression”, but claimed school did not want to listen to them, “*they just kick you out*” (*Young Person 4*). However, at the youth club, the young people expressed that the professionals genuinely cared about them as they would listen and help them find ways of moving forward (these included challenging school systems and processes).

In the discussion, there was not always agreement; for example, one young person said that they felt 2Pac (Rapper) was intelligent, the group laughed at this suggestion, and I encouraged the young person to say why they thought this, but they would not offer any more explanation. However, the Roma young people in Derby will often be engaged in performing music, dance and art for the wider community.

“[Young Person] went to the children’s hospital in Derby hospital and sang for them.” Youth Worker

One young person showed me a collection of lyrics he had written on his phone, over 100 songs and over 20 beats that he had created. I commented that I thought that was amazing and I asked if he thought that showed intelligence. He disagreed because it was ‘easy’ for him, when I commented that I would find that hard, he added:

“You don’t learn this stuff at school, I can’t get a GCSE for this and it won’t help me get a job, so it’s not intelligence” (young person 9).

While the young person was proud of his musical talent, he did not see how it could possibly help his future and therefore he dismissed it.

The school environment had a clear impact on Roma young people’s interpretation of intelligence and intelligent behaviour. However, the young people recognised and valued the wider value-based education in wider environments (the home, community and youth club). The data suggests that additional professional, skilled support in informal/nonformal environments was vital in reducing barriers to learning, supporting Miconi et al.’s (2021) research. The data highlights how the ideologies of intelligence impact young people’s perception of self. Another reason for young people dismissing their own talents might be linked to aspects of social structures and racism which was highlighted in the data.

Racism

Racism was a consistent theme through the data that affected young people’s ideology of intelligence and motivation to engage in education. When asked why young people engage with education, they gave clear answers that showed hope for the future.

“I want to achieve”.

“To get the things I want”.

“A good future, good job and house”.

They discussed the positive influence of family and friends that encouraged group learning. However, when asked what the barriers were to learning, four of the young people said simultaneously: “Teachers”. When asked about this, young people responded but were not keen to go into details:

Interviewer: Why are teachers a barrier?

Young Person 1: Can't explain. They kick you out of the classroom.

Young Person 2: And out of school

Interviewer: Did they tell you why?

Young Person 2: No, they said I be naughty.

Although one young person recognised a positive relationship with teachers, this was felt to be related to how much “they like you”. One young person commented, “They are all racist”. When asked what this meant, several replied “They treat you differently” and “treat you different from others”. Another young person when asked if your teachers think you are intelligent responded with “No, they hate me, don't talk to me”. While the young people were able to articulate these concepts of being ‘Othered’, they did not want to explore those experiences in that situation and signposted to their youth workers. When I asked a youth worker if the young people had communicated their experiences of racism, she replied:

“Yes! ... a universal experience... we hear countless stories of kids... being told they might as well just go home... stories of [Roma young people] telling teachers that they're experiencing racist bullying and nothing happening about it... I've heard kids being called 'Monkeys' or 'Stinking', I've heard white kids tell Roma kids to fuck off back to their own country”.

The Youth Worker also talked about teachers actively seeking to exclude Roma young people.

“A teacher sought to permanently exclude (young person). ‘We want him out of our school’. [the teachers] actively built portfolios to exclude him... Then he started at [Pupil Referral Unit]... I got told by tutors that he was really good, and they asked, ‘why is this kid in the [Pupil Referral unit]? Cause he's a good boy’.”

These experiences of racism influenced Roma young people's concepts of intelligence leading to internalised racism. The young people were asked if they had ever been told by their teachers that they were intelligent; none of the young people identified with this. It is possible that racist ideology combined with intelligence ideologies termed young people as unintelligent, and young people adopted this as their identity (Flynn 2007; Petty 2009; Agrusti and Corradi 2015). Structural inequalities were disclosed by the Youth Worker.

“I'm just wondering if [Roma young people] think intelligence is white... doing well at school, getting qualifications, having jobs and I guess some of the positions like Social Workers, Teachers, Jobcentre workers, a lot of them are white.”

“This is the classic British thing, if you’re working class, not done well at school, girls do hair and beauty and boys do construction’... [Young person], he’s not a boy that if you knew him even for a moment, you’d signpost into construction, so he only stayed on the course for a month... I had another girl, she was going to college to do hair and beauty, and she told me actually she wanted to do medicine, but they told her she wasn’t clever enough.”

“Roma young people are of an ethnic minority. Faced hundreds of years of persecution. Then on top of that, they’re European migrants, on top of that English isn’t necessarily their first language and they live in one of the poorest wards in the whole of the country. These kids are dealing with layers of barriers and prejudice.”

These quotes suggest that the young people’s experience of success was based on ideologies at a structural level with the concept of intelligence being used to demonstrate ethnic superiority (Sani 2019; Gilman 2008; Goodenough 1926).

Self-motivation and Empowerment

When the group were asked if they woke up in the morning and considered themselves to be intelligent, would that affect their experience of school, they responded: “No, school will be the same”. For some of the young people, their experience of school created a feeling of powerlessness and internalised racism, traits often experienced by the Roma community (Fernández 2021; Williams 2018). However, the young people when discussing concepts of kindness as intelligent behaviour described their youth worker as kind because she challenged the school systems. The young people who discussed this said they could not challenge these systems and processes because they were Roma and they were not “clever enough to argue with teachers”. This raised some interesting points about their engagement with the school system. Dietrich and Ferguson’s (2020) research suggested that ethnic groups might actively reduce their academic results to perpetuate stereotypes. The data suggested that for some, school is an oppressive environment that needs to be accepted to be able to move on with life. Others saw school systems and processes being challenged, but this was done by professionals; as a group the young people demonstrated a lack of self-empowerment, and although some academics (Dietrich and Ferguson 2020; Flynn 2007; Petty 2009; Zimmerman and Schunk 2001) argue that the individual has power to affect their learning, the data suggests that Roma young people did not and could not recognise that power and therefore were unable to ‘break the mould’. Witnessing other professionals engage in challenging systems and racist ideologies did not seem to develop a sense of empowerment within this group. Instead, it reinforced internalised racism and Roma young people remained passive participants in challenging existing social structures and systems; this could also be linked to the idea that challenging power required a perceived ‘ethnic and intellectual superiority’.

From the data, internalised racism was shown as none of the young people claimed to be intelligent and none of them spoke positively about themselves in any educational aspect, even when I pointed out skills or actions that could be

considered intelligent behaviour. Praise was shrugged off and not accepted, especially as it did not meet their ideology of what intelligence was. One young person explaining their experience of racism at school described how she managed her anger, turned away from the situation and controlled her emotions when I suggested that as being emotionally intelligent, she responded:

“Really? I don’t think so, I was just trying not to punch her, how is that intelligent? Not punching someone isn’t going to make me a nurse, is it?” (Young Person 13).

Young people often expressed a lack of power, expressing “depression” and “uselessness”, not being a valued member of their community, and their school society was reinforcing these feelings having a direct negative impact on their learning and engagement with others.

Relationships

One young person mentioned the value of relationships with professionals that impacted their learning.

“I had a relationship with the school councillor which really helped me, but once I was excluded, I lost that contact and it really affected my motivation, but my relationship with [Youth Worker] is maintained outside of school and is really important in helping me” (Young Person 21).

This emphasises the power of a positive relationship but also the negative effect of the loss of that support. Another young person commented on additional professional relationships:

“School says there is a long list of people wanting and needing support, too many for them to cope, but I had five councillors and only the sixth was good” (Young Person 18).

These stress that professional relationships are reliant on an individual’s professional skill set and the quality of provision that is provided. The young people continued to discuss relationships and saw other professionals as a key part of supporting them, not just in formal education but also in extra-curricular activities. One young person commented:

“Teachers refuse to help me with my CV” (Young Person 3).

While it could be argued that writing CVs is not a key role of a teacher, there was an expectation from the young person that someone would support them in these types of requirements. Another young person also said:

“When you see people not caring, it hurts, no one is trying to help you, you feel like you don’t have anyone out there, nobody proud of you so you just there at school” (Young Person 10).

Supportive group relationships were considered significant in motivating young people to learn. Support from family and desiring their family to be proud of them was evidenced.

“I want to be a Nurse, help my mum and Dad. Brothers and sisters, I love them the best, I want for them to have everything. Engaging in learning enables me to have everything” (Young Person 9).

“When good people around me, also thinking about my father... My father is the only thing I am living for” (Young Person 10).

While having positive relationships was represented, the lack of relationships was significant; isolation and being alone was described by participants as a significant barrier to learning. Many young people often expressed being put in ‘isolation’ in school. The young people were very aware of their own attitudes and mental wellbeing and the impact this had on their learning.

Conclusions

Qualitative data has identified that racist ideologies compounded with powerful ideologies of their own intelligence affect Roma young people’s engagement with learning in formal environments such as schools; however, family environments and extracurricular activities, in addition to effective and long-term relationships with professionals such as youth workers, can have a powerful influence on individuals’ engagement in learning. Further research needs to be completed with teachers and educational establishments to better understand the creation, implication and actions to combat racist ideologies, especially linked to intelligence.

The data suggests that the idea of intelligence could be impacted by individual values and societal construction (Dweck 2006; Chalari 2016) and that most young people have adopted the ideology of intelligence as a cognitive activity IQ-based approach (Sternberg 1999). The young people generally did not see any value in the wider range of skills and abilities that might be considered intelligent, such as arts and music (Gardner 2006; Goleman 1995); however, the young people often expressed intelligence as something that was a ‘good’ quality and associated with kindness and respect. Young people’s experiences were found to be surrounded by aspects of racism within their formal learning environments. The racist social structures within the formal educational environment alongside individual experience had a significant impact on young people’s engagement with learning environments; it is unclear from the research if these racist ideologies are reinforced or challenged by concepts of intelligence, and more research is needed to confirm this connection. Motivation was closely linked to aspects of relationships; the relationships held with teachers, parents and youth workers have had a significant impact on young people and their motivation to learn, reinforced by the value of group learning. Young people expressed desires to ‘achieve’ in life with successful jobs, homes and families, but this success was not based on qualifications or academic achievements, instead was based on treating people with respect, caring, listening and showing kindness.

“Whenever I learn something new it shows me that life is full of surprises and new stuff gives me strength to push myself forward and that there’s always something new waiting for me at the end of the day... the amazing stuff I want this creativity as well” (Young Person 11).

Applying the outcomes of this research to practice would enable educational establishments to connect with wider educational services, like youth work, to provide wider learning spaces and opportunities for young people to explore their own concepts of intelligence and recognise their values and how these impact their learning journey. With young people more aware of their motivations to learn, this could increase engagement in the learning process but would also require flexibility and additional support structures in educational establishments, for example working closely with local youth workers. The research also highlights the need for educators to examine their unconscious bias which affects their engagement with learners, especially around the ideology of intelligence.

Data Availability The data that supports the findings of this study are not available due to ethical requirements of the research project.

Declarations

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals This research involved human participants after ethical approval was obtained from the University of Derby. No harm was expected from the study, but participants could be signposted to relevant services to offer support should it be needed (Regional Youth Worker). All human participants were given introductory information, gave informed consent to be part of the study and were fully debriefed after the study. This included how to withdraw from the study.

Informed Consent All participants gave full informed consent to be part of the study. The informed consent gave details of their rights under GDPR processes, how to withdraw and any potential of risk of harm. The informed consent information included details of researchers and other university staff should a complaint need to be made. This information was also included the debriefing of participants.

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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