

Policy Paper on Intercultural Education in schools targeting Roma children for the benefit of all children

Introduction/Background

Intercultural education in schools has been a topic for discussions in policy and projects within European organizations and institutions increasingly in the last decade. This was mainly due to issues such as increasing international migration, the historical and multicultural assets of many European countries and the necessity to make formal, non-formal and informal education more culturally open as well as a response to an increasing trend of racial intolerance against the migrant and national ethnic minorities in several European countries.

According to the European Parliament, “Intercultural Education is defined as a pedagogic approach aimed at fomenting a tolerant and sensitive attitude to ethnic, cultural and religious differences between individuals¹”.

Similarly, UNESCO defines the intercultural education as: “the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect”.² Dialogue and mutual respect for diversity are probably the key elements in the majority of the programs targeting inclusive education for school children at all levels.

Studies carried out by Eurydice³ helped to measure national policies of EU Member States in respect of inclusive education curricula, access to intercultural education for all, education for inclusion of diversity or similar approaches but mainly with the focus on migrant children; revealing that not too much of progress have been done to accommodate ethnic national minorities, especially such as the Roma in to the curricular of the European education systems.

There is a relatively high range of programs developed for intercultural learning for migrant children but little has been done to enhance intercultural dialogue in schools between the Roma ethnic minority and majority children in many of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe and in the West Balkan where the population of Roma is the largest.

The Roma are the largest ethnic minority in the European Union, and they constitute over 10 million people including the Roma in the Western Balkans. The Roma has their own non territorial language “Romani” which is spoken in majority of the countries where Roma live, however only few of the countries within Europe make it available as an official language that can be thought in the schools. The Romani language is used with different dialects from an Indo-Aryan origin but the root of the language is the same from

¹ Intercultural Education in schools, Brussels, European parliament, 2008:
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/committees/studies.do?language=en>

² UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education, Paris, March 2006.

³ <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/Eurydice/AboutEurydice>

ancient *Punjabi*, or *Hindi*⁴. The culture and the traditions of the Romani people sometimes differ from country to country but there are some common denominators that are preserved by Romani people, as an example is the “phralipen (brotherhood) - characterized by mutual help, support and solidarity, collective life as opposed to individual life”.⁵

There are several famous Roma personalities around the world in different fields, including the actor and Roma activist, “Yul Brynner; the comedian, Charlie Chaplin; the actress, Rita Hayworth; the actor, Michael Caine; the actor and director Bob Hoskins, Veli Mumin, the boxer and Mirjeta Bajramoska, the handball player.”⁶

The aim of this policy paper is to help to identify solutions and options for Roma children and youth to access and to benefit from intercultural education in schools at European level including the countries of Western Balkan and the countries participating in Bologna process.

Problem Statement

Despite of the fact that the Roma are the largest European minority and are settled in the countries of the European Union since the 14th century; they remain to be the most discriminated ethnic minority throughout Europe until today. The European Union’s Equal Opportunities Commissioner Vladimir Spidla said that: "the Roma are one of the largest ethnic minorities in the EU, but too often they are Europe's forgotten citizens," in addition a report released by the EC in July, 2008 demonstrated that 77% of Europeans are of the opinion that being Roma is a disadvantage in society, on a par with being disabled (79%).⁷

The result of this research certainly reflects the lack of intercultural dialogue between the Roma and the Non-Roma in the society, which often results in discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes against the Roma minority.

These types of stereotypes are often found also in the schools among the teaching staff and in classrooms with majority and minority children; the stereotypes can lead to discrimination and to creation of segregated and special education for Roma children.

Segregated schooling for Roma children is quite common in the 13 countries, where the Roma Education Fund is active. The Roma Education Fund (REF) was set up as part of the Decade of Roma Inclusion on May 12, 2005. The main objective of the fund is to “Reduce the gap between Roma and Non Roma children by providing better access to quality education.”⁸ At the same time REF promotes Roma inclusion in all aspects of the national education systems of countries participating in the Decade of Roma inclusion, as well as others wishing to join this effort and to combat segregation of Roma children in

⁴ <http://www.geocities.com/~patrin/history.htm>

⁵ <http://www.amazinggypsybazaar.com/culture.html>

⁶ <http://www.geocities.com/~patrin/culture.htm>

⁷ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=375&furtherNews=yes>

⁸ www.romaeducationfund.org

education systems. These schools are usually located close to Romani neighborhoods, and are attended predominantly by Romani children; there is a complete lack of interaction with the mainstream population, starting from early childhood until completion of primary education.

During various school visits in REF project sites, we found out that “intercultural education and dialogue” is widely unknown term within the teaching staff of various education institutions. The teachers do not initiate activities that would bring closer the Roma and the majority children within the classroom and will help to diminish the negative attributes towards Roma mainly due to lack of knowledge in this field. By widely spread hostile attitude of majority population and the low knowledge of teachers of intercultural education, results in severe education and communication gap between the Roma and Non Roma children in school systems of various countries across the region.

Objectives

The gap between education results of Roma and non Roma children and a low level of social interaction between the two groups; can be decreased through equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural experience through dialogue and mutual respect in all levels of education and by adoption of concrete policies preventing segregation. The governments need to identify solutions and options for Roma to benefit from intercultural education and to introduce education policies at national levels (including countries of Western Balkan and in the countries participating in Bologna process) related to Roma ethnic minority.

Options

Good examples how to share cultural experience through dialogue and mutual respect among school children are through arts; the MUSE project “Iyouwe share the World” that was developed by the International Yehudi Foundation and implemented in 2008 in eight European countries, demonstrated that school children of different nationalities, religions and ethnic backgrounds learnt about each other through music, dance, paintings, poetry; the activities resulted in sharing the experience with other children from different countries. It was an excellent exercise and experience for all children and artists included in the project. The impact of the project was visible in all children and it will probably leave positive impact on their future school carrier and attitudes towards differences.

The Roma Education Fund within in its three years experience also documented different approaches that are effective in enhancing intercultural exchange among children of Roma ethnic minority with the majority children. For example in Romania, one of the projects that focused on developing the competencies of Roma children and youth in view of ensuring quality education and of preserving the cultural identity organized direct activities to change the public mentality and negative attributes related to Roma children.

The grantee organization organized summer camps and educational workshops for Roma and Non Roma children, this provided all children opportunity to meet other children of their ages, coming from unknown parts of the country, with their differences, but with the same way of thinking and dreaming – as a consequence, all of them they became, with or without conscience, vectors for disseminating in their communities a new way to look at diversity, tolerance, understanding.

Living together with other different children, even for such short laps of time, they realized by their own touch that diversity is natural, identity is necessary, free expression is the nature of being, and intercultural is not just an awfully long term, but a way of living and affirm their own personality.

One of many interesting cases was a young Roma girl from a poor, crowded family, loosing her father at the age of 12, despite the bad economic situation; she completed all 8 classes in a segregated school. The idea for her to continue her studies at high school, in the middle of mainly Romanian pupils, which will look at her like at the ‘black sheep’, was scaring.

She even was at the point to abandon the school: “I’m not going to continue the school. I shall find a job somewhere; it makes no sense – however, nobody pay us any attention.”

Being one of the participants of the intercultural camp in the project, she radically changed her mind, increasing her self-esteem, made her feel better in her own skin, and to understand that she has nothing less than the other teenagers have, with other ethnic or cultural background. She is now in second year of her high school, and she doesn’t want to stop here: “I want to finish the high school, and then I shall continue to college and go on to see the world, because we also can be something in this world.”

Another sample was provided by the experience of preparing the theater performance with “About Teaching” of Anton Pann. A professional actor of Romani origin, Mr. Sorin Sandu, worked only one month with children from a poor school in Bucharest. At the very beginning, the teachers were amazed about his braveness to work with children who have never learned a line from a poem, and who were considered by the teachers mostly as educational problem in that school. Step by step, the children reached an incredible involvement in the action, acting as professionals, following the director’s indications, but most of all surprising their teachers.

The activities did not only leave effect at the children, but also at their teachers, who learned in few days more about their pupils than in many years of teaching experience. They had the chance to discover that children can be treated equally, without preconceived ideas, and they learnt from them how to see the world with different eyes⁹.

Teachers require further and wider cognition with respect to national minorities and they ask for more methodological instruments. Expansion of the key points of Basic schools’ curriculum project in Czech Republic was aimed to increase the knowledge among the majority population regarding people of the Roma ethnicity “Educational bookmarks and puzzles” project worked empirically and helped to adapt the changes that are being

⁹ The Roma Education Fund, Final Report RO 007

applied to General educational programs of Basic schools, so they would fulfill the requirements and interests of national minorities at Basic schools. Within the project the curriculum was enriched by the Romani literature and CDs with the Romani cultural specifics and mp3 versions¹⁰.

A very effective approach remains the integrated education. Another benefit of integrated education is that quite a lot is absorbed through peer learning, and certain amount of competition between children can also produce positive results for all children.

“School desegregation in Bulgaria has grown in the past eight years from a single project started by a Romani NGO into a process that involves several thousand Romani children in nine towns, over sixty mainstream schools, and with a number of Romani organisations acting at local and national levels. The positive effect of the school desegregation process on school attendance and achievement of Romani children is unquestionable and has been documented in a number of studies. The successful transition of Romani children from segregated to integrated schools could not have been achieved without addressing several crucial factors, such as, parental involvement, school environment, and academic and social support. In fact, what made the difference between the school desegregation projects and many other initiatives to improve the education of Roma was the effort and the actual work of engaging the Romani communities in the process by motivational work carried out with Romani parents. The desegregation projects demonstrated that the sustainability of the process depends on the involvement of Romani parents in it and that such involvement is achievable by consistent motivational work.

In addition to the impact on the education of Roma, the school desegregation process opened the way for far-reaching social changes. Although there is still a long way to go, there are several indications that the school desegregation process generates social changes. In the first place, Roma made it clear that they have aspirations and capabilities for participation in the mainstream education. The fact that Romani community activists initiated a process to give Romani children equal chances in education and engaged numerous supporters from the Romani communities presents Roma in a new light: although culturally different, they share the same values as the majority”¹¹.

Analysis of Options

The activities enhancing intercultural dialogue and understanding have certainly demonstrated immediate impact on the project beneficiaries.

¹⁰ Roma Education Fund, Final report CZ 01

¹¹ The case of Integrated Education, The Roma Education Fund Magazine, pp.21-24 by Rumyan Russinov

First and foremost, Romani children who have attended mainstream schools for several years will not go back to segregated education. Their siblings, relatives and friends have an example to follow and a larger scale action involving government resources has the potential to attract to mainstream education many more Romani children. Parents of those children have become more active in looking for better educational prospects for their children. A growing number of Romani organizations engage in advocacy for school desegregation as well as in direct school desegregation action. Civil society organisations are increasingly utilising legal mechanisms to challenge segregated education of Roma.

However, these and many other similar activities are mainly developed at the project level; the direct beneficiaries of the activities are the children and teachers participating in the project but a critical mass of people is not impacted by the change in thinking and behavior towards other cultures.

The main challenge remains, how a project level initiative can have a larger impact on excluded communities, at all school children and at overall teaching staff. The options are severe as mentioned above, but they certainly need to be institutionalized, mainstreamed, and scaled up together in partnerships with the NGO sector.

Recommendations

- 1) Organize active desegregation actions and intercultural activities (affirmative meetings, sport, cultural and arts activities) which have greater impact on the communities, on public mentality (prejudices, perception stereotypes, discrimination, intolerance), and on the quality of Roma children's education should be regularly organized and implemented in school environments in cooperation with NGO's and financed by the Governments.
- 2) The curricula for training of teachers should be updated with new and non-conventional methods of teaching, more open for pupils' needs, as well as with better communication and psycho-sociologic knowledge, more necessary for teachers who are working with Roma children and with their parents.
- 3) To include in textbooks, at all appropriate levels, chapters about the history and culture of Roma, and encourage and support the publication and distribution of books and other print materials as well as the broadcasting of television and radio programmes, as appropriate, about their history and culture, including in languages spoken by them.
- 4) To endeavor, by encouraging a genuine dialogue, consultations or other appropriate means, to improve the relations between Roma communities and non-Roma communities, in particular at local levels, with a view to promoting tolerance and overcoming prejudices and negative stereotypes on both sides, to promoting efforts for

adjustment and adaptation and to avoiding discrimination and ensuring that all persons fully enjoy their human rights and freedoms¹².

5) The International Yehudi Foundation should leverage the positive outcomes of the MUSE project and organize another project targeting Roma students with support of Romani participants (professionals in visual and non visual arts)

Report written:

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¹² Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *General Recommendation No. 27: Discrimination against Roma*. 16/08/2000. *Gen. Rec. No. 27. (General Comments)*

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