

The education of Roma children: inroads to good practice, the REI example

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Introduction

Education is one of the most important vehicles by which the integration of minorities into mainstream society can be promoted. In the case of the Roma, it has special importance, since exclusion from society causes social deprivation. Can Europe afford not to change its educational practices to become more inclusive? Poor educational outcomes are not only a problem for Roma people, but also for the countries they live in. In an era of declining birth rates, impending labor shortages, and growing demands on citizens, no country can afford to have a substantial part of its population without adequate skills for citizenship and employment. For Roma, as for other citizens in the region, developing the skills needed to earn a decent living in these new economies is critical. Improvement of conditions for Roma will also be improvement for society as a whole.

The Roma Education Initiative (REI), begun in 2002, was designed to draw from quality OSI-developed educational resources and experiences, and to target them to schools serving Roma communities, and to Roma communities themselves. Through school and community-based work, REI is designed to advocate strongly and consistently for systemic and policy changes that work against segregation and all forms of racial discrimination of Roma children in the school systems and *to promote equal access to high quality education for all*. Currently, REI is functioning in eight countries of the region where Roma populations are numerous: Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Macedonia and Montenegro.

This paper will reflect on some of the practices that have been launched through OSI's Roma Education Initiative, practices which pioneer multicultural and diversity education in the region. The practices that are discussed will touch upon cross-sectoral approaches in addressing the problems of minority education, the supposed reluctance of minorities to attending school, minority language instruction. It is hoped that this overview will reflect on some "good practices" beginning to take root in the region.

Cross-sectoral approach in addressing the problems of minority education

In REI's conceptualisation phase, it was recognised that any approach to addressing the problems of minorities, and Roma in particular, had to be comprehensive. What does this mean? Projects that are nationally designed and implemented should target and include other sectors that impact on success in schooling. Though REI is an education programme, and cannot solve all problems, it does take into consideration and tries to target other areas "beyond the school."

For example, health is often linked to school success. Children who come from impoverished backgrounds often do not have access to health care, and thus are barred from the schooling process. In Slovakia, one REI project site has incorporated a Roma health coordinator to ensure that children and families from the community access health care and are ready and prepared to enter school. The health coordinator comes from the community and is trusted. She has appropriate education and training and works with and in cooperation with the local health clinic. This position helps bridge an, often, wide gap between minority and majority cultures, and helps ensure that children have access to school. The project is negotiating with the local municipality to make this position permanent.

In Bulgaria, the REI project is planning to address prenatal care and early childcare through outreach to Roma mothers through its early childhood component. Children who are born healthy and subsequently receive adequate nutrition have a better basis for success in school. Measures that ensure good prenatal care and support parents of young children generate high returns. Such outreach will be coordinated and supported through a local Roma community organisation, the Roma Lom Foundation. Locally based advocate NGOs, together with institutions such as credit unions, cooperatives, language groups, and cultural bodies are all part of a community that can demand and support educational success.

Another REI project component that is educational, but linked to poor housing conditions, is to offer after school mentoring and tutoring to Roma youth. Children coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds often do not have the space or support at home they need to successfully complete homework. Developing effective, continuing support mechanisms for Roma students, such as mentoring/tutoring programmes, helps prevent academic failure.

This type of support should not be underestimated. Many students will require ongoing academic support throughout their school careers in order to be successful.

These are just a few brief examples of the ways that REI projects are beginning to improve education by linking with other groups, organisations and governments beyond the school to nevertheless help improve access to and performance in education for Roma children. In its 2003 policy paper titled *Combating the Educational Deprivation of Roma Children*, the REI programme recognises that a large body of research in education shows clearly that educational outcomes are shaped as much by social structures and students' background and environment as by what schools do. [1] An effective approach to improving educational outcomes for Roma, therefore, must be multi-faceted and extend beyond the school. REI projects actively pursue partnerships and solutions with local organisations, and local and national governments to sustain these necessary cross-sectoral practices.

The supposed reluctance of minorities to attending school

It is often stated, in particular regarding the Roma minority, that parents do not care about school and do not want to send their children to school. Such statements, however, are unilateral, placing blame only on the minority group itself, and do not consider whether schools, which represent the majority, welcome and accommodate minority children into mainstream education. It is more likely the case, considering the legacy of past political regimes and more traditional teaching methods and approaches to school governance, that most mainstream public schools are not welcoming. In fact, schools are often completely insensitive to the needs of Roma children. They lack appropriate and meaningful curricula, materials, assessment practices and teaching strategies. Teachers are not trained to work effectively with Roma students, their families and communities, while school administrators may not have commitment to their success. Combined with this, school environments often have bias toward Roma children and Roma in general. The evident consequence is the lack of trust and poor relationships between schools and Roma families. It is not surprising that the Roma minority may be hesitant to send their children to school. This situation will continue as long as there are no incentives for change and schools are not held accountable to families and communities.

REI recognises that schools - and their approaches to cooperating with minority communities - must change in order to improve school success. There are several strategies and approaches to doing this, two of which are outlined here: one is through the position and proper use of Roma teaching assistants, and another is through literacy pedagogies. The Roma teaching assistant (RTA) is a position that has been adopted as a legal position in many countries of the region (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Slovakia). REI contributes, however, by piloting a high quality and pedagogically appropriate use of these assistants. RTAs can play a vital role in liaising with the Roma community regarding their children's education. They can speak honestly with parents about their concerns, and also about the importance of schooling, and communicate with school leaders on behalf of or together with parents. They can also play an important role in mentoring students, older and younger, ensuring that children attend school. In the classroom, they can play a vital pedagogical role, helping teachers to incorporate Roma culture and language into the classroom, and often may serve as a language bridge for younger children who still have not mastered the majority language. [2] It is important to keep in mind that the proper training of Roma teaching assistants - and teachers and school administrators in using RTAs - is important in ensuring that this position is properly used. Too often, assistants are misused, often being stuck with menial work and not participating in the pedagogical process. OSI-developed and supported Step-by-Step NGOs, experts in early childhood education that promote developmentally appropriate, child-centered teaching practices, already have much experience in such training, and are vital implementing partners in all REI projects.

Another example of how REI supports change in school practice is through training teachers in new pedagogies. Teachers participating in REI undergo training to include a balanced approach to literacy development combined with good second language acquisition with a multicultural emphasis. OSI has developed a curriculum on this topic, [3] and Step-by-Step NGOs deliver the training. One way this practice is encouraged is by collecting stories being told in the homes of the children, and incorporating them in the literacy development process. Both parents and children are encouraged to write stories and to create books with titles such as "I am," "I Can," and "My Family." Engaging parents more actively in the literacy development process - including their stories, ideas and themselves in the process - helps bridge the gap between school and home life by demonstrating respect and acknowledging that parents and communities have expertise that can help educators and school personnel do their job. [4] It is by instilling such respect through inclusive practice that ultimately will make school/parent relationships successful.

These are just a few examples of how REI is implementing practices that bring Roma communities and schools closer together. It is hoped that such practices that strengthen home/school relationships will open up the education process to be more equitable for Roma, and thus more attractive. Many other methods exist, and should be explored by practitioners who are committed to equal high quality education for minorities. [5]

Minority language instruction

The Romani language, though now recognised in many countries as an official language, nevertheless poses problems for educators due to the variety of forms in which it exists. Lack of standardisation is one of the biggest reasons (or excuses) for which educators blame the lack of books and materials in the language, and trained practitioners who can teach the language, and teach in the language. Despite this ongoing debate, there are strategies and ways to embrace the Roma language, regardless of which dialect, and to instill good literacy and mastery in the majority language. Many of the approaches that have been piloted in the past through OSI's Roma Special Schools Initiative [6] and which continue through REI, have already been described in the previous paragraphs.

Roma Teaching Assistants can play a critical role in affirming and using the Roma language and culture in early childhood classrooms, helping to make the connection, for children, between their home language and the language of school. When assistants are used as real co-teachers, they can help teachers individualise instruction for their students, help organise small cooperative groups, and to have individual time to lead songs, stories, etc. These opportunities help allow space for the Roma language to be affirmed in the classroom, and helps to ultimately improve overall academic performance. Research has shown that cultural maintenance can have a positive influence on academic achievement. [7] The use of oral histories and stories taken from the home environment to create books and reading materials also helps affirm the Roma language. Moreover, using such creative approaches helps teachers overcome the "lack" of materials they so often complain of.

Concluding thoughts

Traditional education strategies have not promoted school success for Roma children in the past. The time has come for educators to adopt and incorporate methodologies that will provide equal access to high quality education not only for Roma children, but for all children. The Roma Education Initiative is a vehicle through which these new practices can be introduced into countries of the region with significant Roma populations. Ultimately, however, it will be the responsibility of Ministries of Education and governments to ensure that such practices become common and standard for all schools.

Footnotes

[1] The Roma Education Initiative (REI) Working Committee. *Combating Educational Deprivation of Roma Children: A Policy Discussion Paper*, OSI internal document, 2003.

[2] See D. Tankersley, E. Koncokova, and P. Repisky, *Transforming the role of teaching assistants in Slovakia*. Education Children for Democracy, 3. 2002.

[3] D. Tankersley, A. Ada, F.I. Campoy, N. Smith, and B. Stasz, *Education for social justice training manual*. New York: International Step by Step Association. 2003.

[4] D. Tankersley, and A. Kocze, *Strategies that Help Roma Students Successfully Integrate into the School System*, forthcoming, 2003.

[5] See D. Tankersley, *New Ways of Looking at Parent Participation*, forthcoming, 2004.

[6] S. Rona, and L. Lee, *School success for Roma children: Step-by-Step Special Schools Initiative Interim Report*. New York: Open Society Institute, 2001.

[7] Abi-Nadar, 1993; Cummins, 1996; Nieto, 1996 in Tankersley and Kocze, 2003, p. 16.