



## The Curse of Low Expectations

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I often hesitate for a moment when people ask about the work I do, because the answer involves Roma. Roma are *different*, the girl on the train assures me; they don't *want* to be normal, my neighbour asserts. 'Have you seen how they live?' asks a dinner guest.

For the last two years I have been working on a series of reports that examine *Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma*, in eight countries across Central and South-Eastern Europe. These reports present a rather bleak outlook, given that Roma children make up an increasingly large proportion of the population here, and that they have dramatically worse rates of participation and performance in school. But in this regard, it seems they are in many ways only living up to expectations, of their teachers, their peers, and society at large. And this is something that I am certain needs to change, if the situation of Roma – and of the region – is ever to improve.

There are common refrains, "Roma don't care about school", "Roma parents don't bother to enrol their children in the first place or make sure they continue to attend". While this may be a genuine problem, it is only rarely because Roma parents don't care about school. The cycle of low education in Roma communities is one of the most difficult aspects to overcome. Roma parents may be illiterate, and unable to read the notification advising them to enrol their children by a particular date. They may never even get such a notification: Roma in many countries live in marginalised settlements, often illegal or unregulated, and their children are not included in the usual call for enrolment. With poor access to health care, Roma children may not have the medical certificate required for registration.

Many Roma families are so poor they don't even have money to dress children appropriately, and especially in bad weather, they keep them home rather than sending them out without shoes or a coat. Since in many cases Roma settlements are far from a local school, over bad roads and without regular public transport, just getting to school is an obstacle. Money for school supplies may also be limited; in only a few countries are materials provided free of charge to students in need.

And it can be true that Roma families may see only limited value in education. In many countries, Roma have been disproportionately placed into schools for children with intellectual disabilities for years; graduates of these types of schools aren't qualified to do more than the most simple jobs, and cannot even progress to higher education should they want to. Where's the value there?

Segregation of Roma into separate classes or schools is another widespread phenomenon. "Roma children are dirty and they don't know how to sit still, to behave in class – I don't want my children to sit next to them," people tell me. Many Roma children find school to be a dramatically different environment than they have experienced before, it's quite true, and they do not know what is expected of them. Many countries have recognised that pre-school can offer vital preparation for Roma children, first to help them learn the language of instruction if it's not what they speak at home, but also to give them a chance to get used to the school routine. Not enough Roma children have access to pre-school, though: in some countries there simply aren't sufficient places for all children to enrol; in others, the fees are just too high for poor families to spare. So Roma children then arrive for the first day of first grade without any preparation at all.

Segregation is thus characterised as an expediency measure, never discrimination. Roma children are placed together, in order to help them “catch up”. They never do catch up, though. These Roma classes and schools often offer a reduced curriculum, considered more suitable for Roma children who are considered unable to work to the pace in mainstream classes. Students who complete school in such an environment almost inevitably find themselves without the skills they need to succeed on the labour market. Many don’t even bother to finish, seeing as it confers so little advantage. If your school was dilapidated, with broken furniture, no supplies or even heat or indoor plumbing, as many of these schools are, you’d probably be reluctant to attend as well. It’s hardly surprising that the teachers in these schools aren’t generally the most highly qualified or deeply motivated either.

The odds are stacked against Roma children from the very beginning. Growing up in a house where there may not be light to read by, never mind a book to read, Roma children come to school where they are immediately singled out by fellow pupils and teachers alike. Other children may mock inadequate clothes, or a limited understanding of the majority language. Teachers see a child who needs extra support, support they may not be able to give in a full class and without adequate training and preparation. Roma children may have few role models at home to encourage them to stick with school; they struggle to keep up in an unfamiliar language, they don’t find any material about their community or culture in the textbooks, they know that their classmates’ parents don’t want to have them over after class. The lesson that many Roma get about school in the end is, “this isn’t for you.”

With such a clear message, in fact it’s more surprising that so many Roma families do make every effort to put their children through school. With support from community activists and non-governmental initiatives, some Roma parents are finding the support they need to see their children get the quality education to which they’re entitled. After years of developing programmes and policies intended to change the situation of Roma with little success, many Governments are also trying to work more closely with Roma themselves to better target resources and limit funds wasted on irrelevant or unfocused schemes.

Roma are different, of course – just as everyone is distinct and the product of a specific environment. It’s not realistic to ignore the obstacles that Roma children face in getting through school, but it’s no more sensible to write off an entire generation. As discouraging as the current situation can be, there is no reason to believe that change is impossible. Roma are, incontrovertibly, part of European society, and the choice to be made is whether they will stay at the margins, or whether they are drawn into a more inclusive, cohesive social setting. It’s time to lay the curse of low expectations to rest.

**\* Katy Negrin is the senior editor of a recently released series of monitoring reports on Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma, covering eight Central and South Eastern European countries. The reports were produced by EUMAP, the EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program of the Open Society Institute. They are available at <http://www.eumap.org>.**