

ROMA EDUCATION POLICIES IN SOME EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

© Judit TORGYIK
(Kodolányi János College, Székesfehérvár, Hungary)

jtorgyik@kodolanyi.hu

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In the past few years, the development of the education of Roma people has had an important role in the education policies of the EU member countries. A few decades ago in western countries they only made efforts to control the lifestyle of travelling people, but today the realistic aim of building an inclusive society has brought new perspectives into Europe. In the following paragraphs, I am going to present the efforts of the last few years on the basis of EU documents and the relevant specialised literature.

Keywords: Roma education, European Union, educational system, disadvantages, inequalities

Employing teacher assistants and helpers

It has been realised in several European countries that dealing with Roma children is a huge professional challenge for teachers. In order to improve efficiency, teachers are assisted by assistants, helpers, who function as a 'bridge' between the teachers and the children as well as the parents. These helpers can come both from the members of the minority group or from the majority. In older EU member countries the employment of teacher assistants at schools was introduced years ago. This happened so in Germany, in Bremen, where assistant teachers are employed, financed by the Sinti Verein (Sinti Association), to help teachers (Liègeois, 2002). In Hamburg, Roma teachers and social workers are employed to help decrease the number of truancies, and to foster regular school attendance among Roma children. In Hessen and Schleswig-Holstein, Roma intercultural mediators are hired who have a mediating role in the communication between the parents and the schools (Roma and Travellers..., 2006).

In the United Kingdom, schools educating Roma children can rely upon pedagogical assistants and social workers, and they can also ask for extra funding from the central budget (Kardos & Radó, 1999). In Austria, in Vienna, there are assistants in schools educating Roma children since the year 2000 (Roma and Travellers..., 2006). In the new member states there have been similar developments in the past few years, all of which have the utmost approval of the European Union.

In the Czech Republic, teacher assistants are employed in the schools and classes where a number of Roma learners can be found. The assistants work in the institutions under the supervision of the form teachers. Their tasks are the following: helping education, promoting communication between the

disadvantaged minority groups and the schools, helping resolve conflicts, and organising optional music and drama classes. All in all, they have a role both in assisting classroom and out-of-classroom education. Only people with at least a complete primary school education can function as assistants after having successfully completed the assistants' course (Nelešovska, 2007; Messing, 2003).

In Slovakia, the Ministry of Education introduced the teacher assistant profession in 2002. (Advancing Education of Roma in Slovakia, 2007:36).

Besides the countries mentioned above, the employment of teacher assistants has been introduced in Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland as well (Roma in Europe..., 2010). In Slovenia, we can also find teacher assistants of Roma origins who, besides performing other tasks, help teachers understand the behavioural differences that come from the minority cultural background (Režek, 2007). They play the role of a cultural mediator in the school, contributing to a more efficient teaching.

A very similar project has been launched and successfully operated in Hungary, Ózd as well, in which Roma adults have been charged with performing janitor's tasks in one of the local primary schools. The idea of the programme came from a successful initiative in Spain (Mészáros, 2008). Within the framework of either the public work programme or a project funded by the local government, several Hungarian municipalities – e.g. Székesfehérvár – have started their own projects of employing Roma people as assistants in their schools. Considerable achievements have been reported. However, the employment of Roma assistants has not become common practice in Hungary even though it promises spectacular success.

Launching preparatory classes

Most Roma children start school with a considerable backwardness. To help them catch up with the others, several countries have introduced preparatory classes, the aim of which is to provide early development, a certain compensation, and to treat disadvantages in order to promote success at school. These measures have been designed to prevent the problems that would appear later in the children's lives.

Knowing that there are serious problems in several aspects of learners' school efficiency, in the Czech Republic, in the 1990s, preparatory classes were established to help them. The preparatory classes are held in nursery schools and the junior sections of primary schools, and their aim is to prepare children for school life, as well as to preserve Roma culture. In these classes, lessons are not 45 minutes long but are adapted flexibly to the individual pace and stage of development of the children and cater for the individual needs of the learners (Nelešovska, 2007).

We must know, however, that nursery school education in the Czech Republic is not free of charge, parents have to pay if they want their children to go to nursery school. Thus, most underprivileged children do not receive nursery education. The preparatory classes for Roma children are, however, free.

In Slovakia, the first “grade 0” classes were launched well before accession to the EU in academic year 1992/93 as a pilot project. (Advancing Education of Roma in Slovakia, 2007).

In Lithuania, preparation for school life is also supported in the form of EU projects (Roma in Europe..., 2010).

In Hungary, the introduction of preparatory classes was scarce as preparation for school life is the task of compulsory nursery schools, so encouraging nursery school attendance, increasing the number of children who can take part in it seems to be the most fruitful solution. A very good example of pre-school preparation is the Kedves Ház (Kind House) programme of the primary school in Nyírtelek, where Roma children were educated in special classes in the first two years, and then integrated into the classes of their majority peers. The aim of this initial separation was to foster getting used to the school environment, help development based on personal needs, compensate for backwardnesses, and help children take to learning. It also had the aim of providing a good atmosphere and a learning pace adapted to individual needs.

Mentoring

In several European countries, mentoring programs were launched using EU funding. The main point of this initiative is that teachers, peers, or even parents help disadvantaged children to go on with their studies, to do homework, and they also provide moral support to the children if they have everyday problems. The EU does not only encourage mentoring for children, but also for whole families or adults in its programmes focusing on Roma.

In France, this long-established initiative has been going on for years. Elderly, retired, or unemployed people, as well as university students offer their voluntary help to disadvantaged ethnic groups, and do not require financial compensation for their work. Their reward is the feeling that they have helped others, were not bored, or that they were useful members of their societies (Bajomi, 2001). Developed western countries always involve the civil sector in performing the different tasks, and this is often done by volunteers. However, volunteering does not have any traditions in Hungary or in any other central and eastern European country. This is attributable to the underdeveloped state of the civil sector. In the past few years, volunteering for achieving social goals has not been customary, whereas the same activity is rewarded with extra points during the university application process in developed western countries. Young people are thus motivated to join socially useful activities before they start their university studies.

Mentoring has also appeared in Romania, where between 1998 and 2001 a project titled 'School Development in Roma Communities – Equal Chances for Roma Children' (funded together by the Center Education 2000+ and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs) undertook a similar project in which parents also helped the children. Teachers and secondary school learners were trained as mentors. The mentors were supervised and helped by the teachers, and as a result of their work, all children involved were able to complete the school year, some of them with excellent results (Ciolan, 2001).

In Hungary, the idea of mentoring first came up in the projects funded by the Soros Foundation. Roma children and their supporting teachers had the opportunity to apply for a scholarship, the prerequisite for which was a minimum school achievement of grade 3.51 (Etüdkök módszertanra, 2000). The positive outcome of this was that several children went on to tertiary education, and got a professional impetus to carry on their studies that would never have been imaginable in their families. The mentoring programme later reappeared in the calls of several EU tenders in Hungary.

Facilitating school attendance

There is a common problem concerning the education of Roma children: they miss a lot of lessons, and there are a lot of drop-outs among them. They miss far more lessons than their majority peers. This is due to several factors, e.g. they have to attend on their younger siblings, a holiday, parents do not want to send their children to school, financial problems, travelling, etc. (Liègeois, 2002). Fulfilling the requirements is not only important because of acquiring the basic competences, but also because it is of crucial importance when the young people want to get employment, as they need the knowledge and the skills which enable them to find jobs for themselves.

Several good solutions have been proposed in European countries to facilitate school attendance. In Slovakia, all school-age children are officially registered and the social department of the local governments regularly checks the children's school attendance. At the same time, social benefits and child-care allowances are only paid if the children attend school regularly (Advancing Education of Roma in Slovakia, 2007). Without this, no social help is given to the families so parents are truly interested in schooling their children. Hungary has followed the same system for the last few years.

In Finland, it is the task of the local authorities to survey and regularly search for dropouts (Roma in Europe...,2010). In the Netherlands, the children are officially registered similarly to Slovakia. Children above the age of 3 get a so-called sofi-number, which indicates that the child is of school-age (nursery school is also compulsory). Dropouts are regularly checked and visited by the local authorities, which try to direct them back into the system and make sure that they get at least a vocational qualification of some type (Balogh, 2006).

There are countries, however, where travellers cannot attend school regularly as the families continually change their place of residence. In Germany, the different provinces have their own education policies, but in 2003 they introduced the so-called 'school diary' for travelling children. At the beginning of the travelling season children get their diaries and parents are required to keep track of their child's progress. To facilitate this, children are supplied with coursebooks and other materials. The diary must be copied

by the parents and sent back to the child's original school (Stammschule, the place where the child is registered).

Facilitating learning out of school

Several international studies have shown that disadvantaged children are in great need of the so-called extracurricular activities to be able to perform well at school. This can happen in several forms, for example afternoon study circles, clubs, additional lessons, talent development, or remedial tutorials are all feasible alternatives. These complementary activities have a positive effect on children's performance.

In Great Britain, there are "homework clubs" in several schools where Roma children can do their homework for the next day in a quiet atmosphere and where all the necessary materials are available to them. Apart from these, there are "study clubs" as well where learners can get remedial tutorials (Messing, 2003).

In Sweden, teachers and teacher assistants of Roma origins or native speakers of the Romany language are employed in primary schools to provide well-organised help to children in doing their homework (Olgac, 2002). In Germany, there are mobile schools which provide an afternoon learning facility and help for travelling people (The school education..., n.d.).

In Hungary, a new initiative was born in the form of "Tanodas" (places of learning). The organisers at the Józsefváros Tanoda in Budapest realised that Roma children do not have the prerequisites of successful learning at home (books, equipment, parents who facilitate learning) that are key factors in children's development. That is why they created their institution which was aimed at helping afternoon learning and also took a role in forming children's identity. The idea of the Tanoda programme has reappeared in the Hungarian Human Resource Development Operational Programme (HEFOP).

Preparing teachers

It is a general problem in Roma education throughout Europe that the teachers are absolutely not prepared to teach and educate Roma children. They did not receive adequate training during their university years, and they did not participate in any kind of training that would give them help in performing this task. Dealing with Roma children requires the knowledge of the methodology of intercultural and multicultural teaching; at the same time, educating disadvantaged children also requires a thorough knowledge of how to apply social skills at school. Teaching Roma children does not end with presenting the material to be learnt; the teacher needs cultural and social competences to be able to function successfully.

In the last few years, an increasing number of EU countries require from teachers to be able to successfully educate children from ethnic minorities or migrant communities. This has a long-established history in the older member countries as migration has affected them to a considerable extent. In the Federal Republic of Germany, Roma education was introduced in teacher training programmes from the 1980s. At Oldenburg University, for example, a post-gradual course was organised for social pedagogues and future teachers, with the aim of familiarising them with Roma culture (Liègeois, 2002).

The western countries were the first to introduce a child-friendly approach. Adopting this in eastern Europe has been facilitated by the

transition to capitalism and accession to the European Union. The EU promotes activities that are concerned with learning about and continuing the traditions of children coming from different cultures, and several EU projects have been launched where tenders can be submitted. Teachers had to be prepared for intercultural and multicultural education.

In the Czech Republic, the qualification requirements of teachers now include the preparation for multicultural education. Teachers who have Roma pupils are required to have an awareness of Roma culture and to be willing to know their pupils, and strive to provide them with a sense of achievement (Nelešovska, 2007).

In Romania, the qualification requirements of teachers also include the previously mentioned expectations, and from the 1999/2000 school year teacher trainees can take up optional courses during their university studies in multicultural education, educational sociology, or pedagogical anthropology at Babeş-Bolyai University (Kovács, Fóris-Ferenczi & Birta-Székely, 2009).

The initiatives launched by the different organisations of the Soros Open Network – OSI, CEDU 2000+ – have achieved several innovative results in teacher training, further education of teachers, materials development, and publishing auxiliary materials, and have had positive experiences in training teachers and educational managers, as well as in finding solutions in close cooperation for local or regional education problems (Torgyik, 2006).

In Prešov, Slovakia, a Roma Educational Centre was opened in 2001 under the auspices of a PHARE project, which provides teachers with methodological help. At the same time, it has an important role in preparing the concept of integrated education, and also in teacher training and the preparation of teacher assistants (The school education..., n.d.).

Reducing the distance between the culture of the school and the children

In most European countries, especially in western ones, there is a tendency among schools to adapt to children, to take their socio-cultural background into consideration during their education. The child-friendly approach gained ground in these countries first, but in the last few years it has been adopted in newer EU member countries as well. Education in western countries is much more flexible, tolerant, and pays more attention to the needs of the schoolchildren. In Eastern Europe, child-friendly methods have generally been used only in the world of alternative schools.

However, the methodologies that place the child in their focus should have a serious role in the education of the disadvantaged. Alternative schools in eastern Europe are primarily available to well-off families, inhabitants of the capitals or the children of the intelligentsia. Predominantly those who can pay the tuition fees of alternative schools usually run by private foundations. Their methods are therefore not available to those who would really need them: disadvantaged families, poor people, ethnic minorities, who all have a much smaller chance to be admitted to these schools.

It is to be noted, though, that child-friendliness is gaining ground in the education of the Czech Republic; they set the aim of completely renewing the education of the Roma, establishing classes which focus on music and dance, launching programmes to help the development of those who have weaker language skills, and the promotion of multicultural education. In day-time homes, they have introduced optional activities that Roma children are particularly interested in, such as activities accompanied with music and

dancing (Nelešovska, 2007). The Czech Republic has taken into account the needs of the Roma children, recognised their interests, and tried to build on this foundation, which can be considered an example to be followed.

Since the 1990s, the idea of inclusive education has also appeared in the Czech Republic, and the emphasis was put on the fact that differences were not considered as something negative any more but as an asset in education (Staněk, 2007:33).

In Romania, the exploration and representation of local culture had already appeared in projects before accession to the European Union. For example, in the project titled “School Development...”, a very important part of the project was asking old Roma inhabitants about their traditions, their everyday history (oral history). During this project, children collected tales, stories, folk traditions from the adults and then later used this knowledge in their school education as well (Ciolan, 2001). In Romania, Bucharest University offers courses in Romany language and culture, which are very popular among students of Roma origins (The school education... n.d.).

In Hungary, there is an upsurge of interest in Roma culture, which is shown by the fact that Pécs University runs courses in Romology, the methodology of educating Roma has become part of teacher training syllabuses, and departments of sociology present the social aspects of the issue to their students. There are also state recognised language exams in the Lovári language. EU funds also help the propagation of child-friendly methods, there have been significant achievements in the past years in the form of books and attitude forming trainings.

Adaptation to the children and their socio-cultural characteristics is very well shown by the sheer attitude of the schooling system towards travelling people in the different countries. However, the French ministry of education does not encourage schoolchildren to regard distance learning as a regular way of learning during the years of compulsory schooling. The knowledge of travelling children is supervised and assessed during their school years by specialised teachers (The school education..., n.d.).

In France, we can see several examples of mobile education, which are usually founded upon civil initiative, a civil organisation helping Roma establishes these schools, a constant feature of which is mobility (following a group or meeting several groups at a given place), the children work in a class that is suitable for their skills, education is flexible, provides opportunities for individual care, and also uses the method of mixed classes (Liègeois, 2002:121). In Greece, Germany, and the Netherlands, the education system is also adapted to the needs of travelling people in the form of caravan schools that help school-age children who, travelling with their families, have a non-ordinary lifestyle.

Social assistance to schools and children

Several EU member countries help the active school attendance of Roma children with different social benefits. In Slovakia, disadvantaged schoolchildren can get free meals and scholarships since the academic year 2003/2004 (Advancing Education of Roma in Slovakia, 2007). In neighbouring Czech Republic, Roma children can get scholarships during their secondary and tertiary education, and the most disadvantaged ones can get free school equipment (Advancing Education of Roma in Czech Republic, 2007). In Bulgaria, free school books and scholarships are granted to Roma children (Advancing Education of Roma in Bulgaria, 2007).

In Italy, schools can provide books, as well as travel and health care subventions to those children who need these, and the school can ask for auxiliary funding from the ministry of education. In Denmark and the United Kingdom, schools get extra funding from the national budget to provide meals to children (Kardos & Radó, 1999).

The Hungarian ministry of education launched the Útravaló Program (“Provisions for the Journey” Programme) in 2006. This was modelled upon the well-established mentor program that had worked very well at the Soros Foundation – so it became a scholarship programme for disadvantaged children and their teachers, which provided funding to help further education and passing entrance examinations at universities (Szále, 2010). Today, disadvantaged children can get free meals at nursery schools three times a day, and the children who are entitled to a child protection allowance get free schoolbooks.

From the above mentioned examples the tendencies that have interwoven the education policies of several European countries in the last few years can be seen very clearly. If we analyse these tendencies, we can discover the innovative tendencies all over Europe that are quite similar in most EU member countries; however, we can also see that the most important initiatives are interlaced with the traditional national characteristics of the individual countries.

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