



Multiple belongings:

achieving equality of opportunity for all Europe's young children



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The Roma: challenging discrimination in the minds of millions

This article looks at attempts to reverse centuries of inequality experienced by a community living across many countries in Europe

A history of oppression

The Roma first came to Europe over 1,000 years ago, migrating from northern India. Today their total population is estimated at between eight and 12 million, the greatest numbers living in Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and the former Yugoslavia. Throughout their time in Europe, they have faced suspicion and persecution. The Nazis sent many to ghettos and concentration camps, where large numbers were killed; many others were repressed and murdered under Stalin.

Life under post-war communism was relatively tolerable, with access to housing, health care and jobs. But with the fall of Communism, the Roma's situation deteriorated. Today, they lack access to good housing, health services and schools; segregation of Roma children into special classes and schools, where the quality of education is invariably lower, is widespread. With few resources and poor education, the Roma can seldom compete for jobs or start their own businesses.

Many Eastern European Roma filed asylum claims, though few succeeded. Since these applications peaked at the end of the 1990s, Roma access to health and education has improved slightly. States applying for EU membership had to amend legislation and launch programmes to improve the position of Roma, such as the provision in Slovakian schools of Roma assistants to help Roma children adjust to school and to speaking Slovakian, a foreign language to many.

Private foundations and NGOs have contributed to initiatives, such as the Roma Education Initiative (REI). REI ran from 2002 to 2005, led by the Open Society Institute (OSI), and focused on projects in seven countries - Bulgaria, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia; members of the International Step by Step Association acted as national partners. There were four aims: improved educational outcomes; supporting integration of Roma into mainstream schools and classes; a comprehensive approach, working with children and young people from birth to 18 years and with a wide range of partners

including Roma NGOs; and policy impact, leading to long-term change. Results included 2,000 Roma children gaining access to pre-schools; hundreds more moving into integrated educational settings; and enhancing the skills of teachers and Roma teaching assistants.

REI in Bulgaria

Roma make up about eight per cent of Bulgaria's population, around 680,000 in 2000. The REI programme focused on retaining children in school, drop-out among Roma pupils being widespread. There are three critical points. The first is the transition from pre-school to primary school. Several reasons contribute to the exclusion of Roma children in the first grade and their early drop out. Parents must pay fees for kindergarten, which are often unaffordable for Roma families; only 16 per cent of Roma children attend. An estimated eight to ten per cent of Roma have Romanian as their mother tongue. Some localities have introduced Roma teacher assistants and preparatory classes, but this depends on funding.

The second critical point is the passage from primary to basic education, between the fourth and fifth grades. There are many reasons for drop out here: inability to cope with the material required to complete the fourth grade, financial limitations, early marriages amongst Roma girls and a lack of family and community support to educate the children.

The third critical point comes after basic education. To continue their



education, students have to sit exams. The curriculum content is difficult and students usually require additional preparation, with help from parents or private instructors. But few Roma parents can assist their children with money or with knowledge.

The REI project in Bulgaria employed a new, integrated approach, targeting the entire educational system and engaging many actors, including teachers, school directors, parents, and students. Activities were initiated to improve the quality of education through community development and school improvements. Teacher training workshops, the first training since qualifying for many participants, included child-centred teaching methodologies, second language approaches, Roma culture and history, and education for social justice. In addition, the project introduced a Summer School Programme.

Summer School Programme

An example of this Programme took place in June 2004 and 2005 in three schools in Blagoevgrad, Lom and Glogjane. In these towns, around 95 per cent of Roma live in isolated neighbourhoods, unemployment has been estimated at 90 per cent and illiteracy is rising. More than 500 children (358 Roma), 20 teachers, three Roma Teacher Assistants and 15 representatives from local Roma communities participated. Children were from grades one to eight, but most came from the first four.

The children could learn together in various interest groups throughout the two week Summer School. For example, in the group for dance and music, the children could learn about musical instruments, great musicians, singing and dancing. Students interested in science could participate in experiments in chemistry, biology, and physics. In the mathematics group the excellent students were encouraged to help their peers to overcome difficulties in solving equations.

The Programme increased children's interest in school, contributing to an overall decrease in the number of drop-outs. It also contributed to greater emotional security and self-esteem, shown in interviews for the external evaluation. Roma children achieved better results as evidenced by

achievement of mainstream curriculum standards. Overall, they were better prepared to enter and complete the next stage of education. Last but not least, the Programme led to more interaction between and among adults and children of different ethnic groups. Everyone had fun together and shared knowledge.

What next?

The REI has many similar success stories and many lessons have been learnt, including the importance of a comprehensive approach, networking and strategic alliances, support systems such as centrally-delivered technical assistance, and the time needed to implement complex changes (at least four years when REI projects had, at most, three). It also came up against major obstacles to achieving equal opportunities for Roma children. Changes at national policy level often fail to produce local changes, due to lack of political will and widespread prejudice. The Hungarian government, for instance, has legally banned segregation and pledged to integrate over 700 all-Roma classes by 2008; but with no monitoring process in place, little has actually changed. All this points to the need for more work – on awareness raising, training and community action – and more resources to support this work.

So what happens now? Step by Step organisations from Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe have raised more than \$1 million in 2007 from a variety of donors to implement national Roma education programs, in close

cooperation with Ministries of Education. On a larger scale, a project – the 'Decade of Roma Inclusion' – was launched in 2005 by the EU, the World Bank, OSI and the governments of eight countries. As part of the project, all governments are pledging further antidiscrimination laws and improved services and infrastructure; education is one of four focus areas. Roma participation is supposed to be central to the project, though questions remain about whether Roma have been sufficiently involved; while a recent monitoring report concludes that "even when problems of segregation have been identified, a comprehensive approach to the problem has not been initiated in any country".

At a conference in Budapest in April 2007, Alexandre Marc, director of the Roma Education Fund, said there has been "little improvement in access to quality education and this comes from the increased segregation of communities". While Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany acknowledged both the need for government action to spur integration and the deep-seated prejudice against the Roma: "Discrimination exists in the minds of millions... [W]e are faced with a challenge that is more complex than passing laws and creating institutions."

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