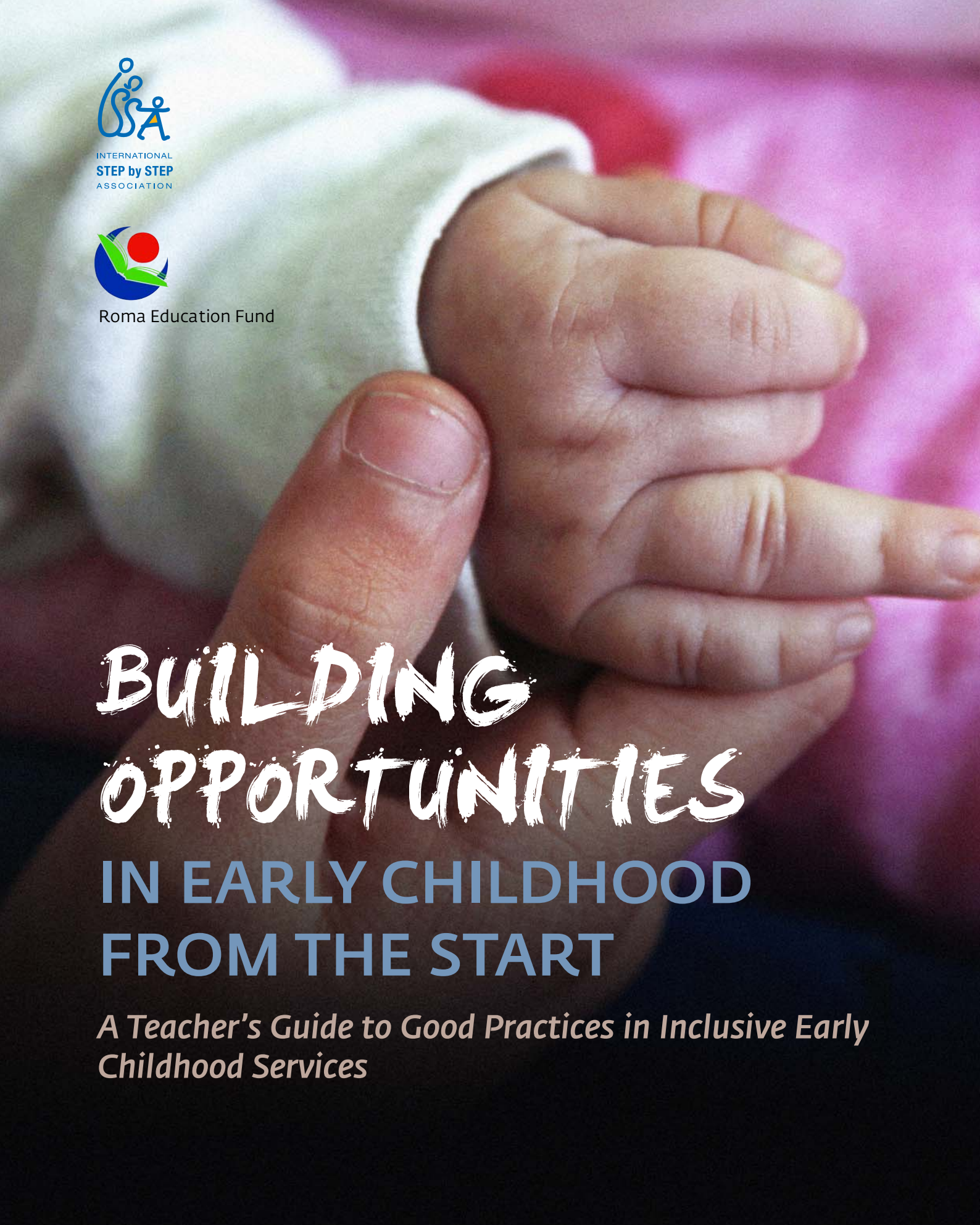

INTERNATIONAL STEP by STEP ASSOCIATION

Roma Education Fund

# BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD FROM THE START

*A Teacher's Guide to Good Practices in Inclusive Early Childhood Services*

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*This guide was developed within the framework of A Good Start (AGS). AGS was financed in part by the European Commission – Directorate General for Regional Policy, and was coordinated by the Roma Education Fund (Hungary) in partnership with the International Step by Step Association (Netherlands), the Slovak Governance Institute (Slovakia), and Fundacion Segretariado Gitano (Spain). It was authored by Zorica Trikic, ISSA Program Specialist, and coordinated by Mihaela Ionescu, ISSA Program Director.*

*The production of this guidebook was coordinated by the International Step by Step Association and the Roma Education Fund. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Roma Education Fund or its partners.*

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# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was written for all professionals and para-professionals – such as educators, preschool teachers, Roma mediators or assistants, and so on – who are interested in and dedicated to working for better outcomes for young Roma and all children. Although this guide focuses on Roma children, it was not intended to additionally stigmatize Roma children and their families, nor to support or exacerbate the "Roma children" label. This guide does not claim that all Roma children are the same, with no cultural, gender, socio-economic, or other distinctions, not does it claim that Roma children are inherently different from non-Roma children.

This guide is intended to support professionals and para-professionals who are committed to creating better life outcomes for vulnerable Roma children and to helping them reach their full potentials. The ideas and suggestions offered in this guide are not intended to be universal solutions which can be applied to all situations and all children; the specific context must always be considered when adapting these ideas and suggestions. The primary underlying idea of the guide is the now well-accepted notion that young children benefit from ***high-quality preschool***, particularly children from poor or marginalized families, and, as such, early education based on the principles of equity and inclusion can aid in breaking the generational cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

The ideas presented in this guide build upon materials and educational tools developed in the ISSA network, including: ISSA's definition of quality pedagogy; Competent Educators of the 21st Century: Principles of Quality Pedagogy; the accompanying Professional Development Tool[1]; and experiences and knowledge gathered through the implementation of A Good Start.

To enhance interactivity, the guide consists of:

- Theoretical sections with results and explanations from different studies and research
- Reflection sections where readers are encouraged to think through and reflect on their own practice or examples from another practice; these reflections can also be used during trainings or when working with parents
- Tips and ideas on how to put the values of inclusive, high-quality education into practice
- Examples of good education practice from the AGS project

***We hope you will find this guide useful!***

[1] Available at: http://www.issa.nl/qrp.html

# ABOUT A GOOD START

A Good Start is a European Union financed project aimed at raising outcomes in early childhood education and care (ECEC) for Romani and non-Romani children in an effort to enhance school readiness and long-term life opportunities, while scaling up access to quality ECEC services for disadvantaged Romani children. Project objectives include: improving access to quality early education for disadvantaged Romani children; improving parenting practices; and increasing access to and utilization of early health services for Romani youth.

From June 2010 until June 2012, A Good Start has operated through broad international and local partnerships in 16 localities in four countries: the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.

A Good Start, led by the Roma Education Fund, has three international partners:

– Fundacion Secretariado Gitano (FSG)
– International Step By Step Association (ISSA)
– Slovak Governance Institute (SGI)

As well as 12 local partners:

– Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
– Humanitarian and Charitable Association of the Roma KHAM (KHAM)
– National Roma Centrum (NRC)
– Roma Education Center "Ambrela" (Ambrela)

Hungary

– College of Nyíregyháza
– Romano Trajo
– Unity in Diversity Foundation (UDF)

Romania

– Romani CRISS
– Ruhama Foundation

Slovakia

– Civic Association Equal Chances (Equal Chances)
– County Association of Roma Initiatives (KARI)

– Cultural Association of Roma in Slovakia (KZRSR)
– Methodological and Pedagogical Centre Bratislava (MPC Bratislava)

The ISSA member NGOs who contributed to the implementation of the project on the local level were:

FYR Macedonia
– Step by Step Foundation for Educational and Cultural Initiatives

Hungary
– Partners Foundation Hungary

Romania
– Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development

Slovakia
– Wide Open School Foundation/Nadacia Skola Dokoran (NSD)

The project was financed by the European Commission Directorate General for Regional Policy (EUR 2,046,104.38). To ensure the smooth operation of this project, the Roma Education Fund allocated an additional EUR 54,449 to cover unanticipated costs. REF also involved a number of other donors that financed complementary activities to the AGS project for a total of EUR 437,712 as follows: Bernard van Leer Foundation (EUR 260,918), LEGO Foundation (EUR 107,660), and the Network of European Foundations (EUR 69,134).

A Good Start (AGS) directly targets over 4,000 Romani and non-Romani children, and their parents and caregivers, with explicit but non-exclusive policies. Project interventions are center-, community-, and home-based, and project activities include enrollment support, accompaniment and transport to preschool, provision of alternative preschool programs, home visits, and community events on education and health. Additional project activities are aimed at involving parents in their children's development with initiatives such as the Your Story reading program and the Home Preschool Community Liaison program where parents deliver preschool sessions. To date, the project has successfully broken down material, discriminatory, and motivational barriers to education and health care, resulting in access to preschool educations (both mainstream and informal) and health care services for more children. Furthermore, parents' motivation and knowledge about their children's educations has increased, and relations between kindergartens and Romani parents have improved.

The information for this guide was collected during the project implementation process. In November 2011, local

partners contributed ideas in separate country workshop sessions during the Fourth Transnational Workshop – "A Good Start Summit" – held in Baile Felix, Romania.

Additional interviews were carried out with the project staff who are responsible for monitoring and evaluation, and with the United Nations Development Programme and World Bank staff who are involved in assisting AGS.

Collecting ethnicity-based data is the subject of frequent discussion in the area of Roma socio-economic exclusion. Evidence-based inclusion policies require quality data that has been ethnically disaggregated. Otherwise the development of inclusion cannot be measured and exclusion cannot be addressed.

Significant focus was given to collecting data that would allow the project team to track and report progress on activities and outputs within the AGS project, as well as outcomes and how to identify effective strategies suitable for scaling up at the European level.

Given that this was a pilot project, and the data collection was complex, our processes cannot serve as a comprehensive model for other data collection efforts. However, we have learned a number of useful lessons along the way that can inform other initiatives, especially international projects in the area of early childhood education and care aimed at the Roma and other marginalized communities.

The experience of our partners varied by country and locality since different national frameworks and local situations affect the details of collecting data.

All of the data collection tools referred to in this guide can be downloaded from the Roma Education Fund website and the project team would be happy to make the rest available on request.

This guide is intended to serve both practitioners and policymakers in the areas of data collection, early childhood education, social inclusion, and international development.

*All boys and girls, regardless of their background, abilities, health, place of residence, or socio-economic status, have the right to quality early child-hood education, healthcare, and equal life opportunities!*

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION – UNDERSTANDING INCLUSION

***Comprehensive early childhood care is a key to creating a world characterized by hope and change rather than by deprivation and despair and to building countries that are thriving and free.***

UNICEF, 2001

This guide was created as support material for preschool practitioners who want to provide a high-quality practice to the children and families with whom they work. Before you begin reading this guide, please complete this short exercise.

## *REFLECTION 1*

Find a nice, quiet place, sit down, and close your eyes. Imagine that you are traveling to a new planet that's very interesting and exciting. Your trip is part of a government initiative to increase access to new experiences for people who have not had the opportunity to visit interesting and exotic places. You are very happy and nervous at the same time. During the trip some of your fellow passengers give up and they decide that they do not want to continue the journey.

You persevere and arrive. When you leave the space shuttle you are faced with a group of people who are similar to you but also different. They greet you in a strange way: from a distance and with frozen smiles. One of them, the person who appears to be the most important, is telling you that your group needs to separate to assure that all of you have a chance to interact with the local people. Now you are more or less alone with them. They take you to the place where they work and spend their time. They are not rude to you, but they glance in your direction with interest and, from time to time, they giggle while staring at you. No one wants to be near you. The person who seems to be in charge starts to speak. Suddenly, you realize that you have a problem with their language: you can understand some words, but, in general, you can neither speak their language nor grasp their

meaning. They ask you a question, but you are unable to answer. Everyone thinks you are so dim-witted and your self-esteem is crumbling. You start to question your decision to take this journey… you want to give up, run away, and never come back…

– Now open your eyes and think about this story and your reaction to it. Try to answer the following questions:
– What happened?
– How did you feel? Why?
– What was missing?
– Could this be prevented? How?
– What would you have needed to feel more welcomed and accepted?
– What would you have needed to be sure that you were safe?
– What would you have needed to be motivated to learn?
– Does this situation remind you of something that you experienced in your private or professional life?
– In your professional life, what do you do when you know that a new child is joining your group, especially if that child is from different cultural, socio-economic, or ethnic background? What do you try to provide to make them feel welcome?

Make a list of your answers, and keep it with you while reading this guide From time to time while reading this guide review what you have written and reflect, because we are sure that you already know what children need and have ideas on what quality practice in ECD is about.

# CHAPTER 2: HIGH-QUALITY LEARNING AND CARE FOR ALL CHILDREN

***The ideal early education system should provide high-quality care and education for all children; it is both integrated and differentiated; it ensures children meet developmental and educational goals; it is attractive and affordable for all families, regardless of their social class or ethnicity; it adapts to individual needs and preferences; it works in both a child- and family-centered way; and it is able to compensate early educational disadvantages.*** [2]

This guide promotes inclusive and high-quality practices in early childhood education programs and institutions for children – especially children from the most disadvantaged groups such as vulnerable Roma children. As mentioned earlier, this guide is not meant to give the false impression that Roma and Roma children are a homogenous group; rather, this guide aims to highlight the diversity among Roma and Roma children (like any group) with relation to social status, spoken language(s), level of education, gender roles, physical appearance, religion, housing, professional identities, and so on. However, this guide would like preschool teachers to be aware of the reality that some Roma children belong to one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society: children who grow up in extreme poverty and thus experience malnutrition and intolerable living conditions, such as severe overcrowding or a lack of running water and community infrastructure. This guide focuses on providing support to these disadvantaged and vulnerable children whose holistic development is endangered by their situation, as well as providing support for their families, which are often characterized by low levels of education, lack of employment, and high levels of stress caused by poverty and lack of income.[3]

[2] Helen Penn (2009) *Early Childhood Education and Care, Key Lessons from Research for Policy Makers*, An independent report submitted to the European Commission by the NESSE networks of experts, European Commission. Available at: http://www.nesse.fr/nesse/nesse_top/tasks

[3] John Bennett (2012) Roma Early Childhood Inclusion, Overview Report, OSF, REF, UNICEF. Available online: http://www.romachildren.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/RECI-Overview-final-WEB.pdf

The idea is also ***not to additionally stigmatize Roma children*** by creating the false impression that working with them requires very special skills and knowledge, and that only "very special preschool teachers" can provide this kind of practice. On the contrary, we want preschool teachers to feel ***confident, strong, and relaxed in their work***. We want preschool teachers to understand that high-quality practice is something that every child needs in order to develop his/her full potential and be successful in further schooling and in life in general, while there are also some children, and particular groups of children, who need extra support and guidance. We want preschool educators to act responsibly, using all possible opportunities to increase children's well-being by being aware of the many obstacles some children and families need to overcome in order to live decent lives. We also want to motivate educators to reflect on their practice, ask critical questions, and find places for improvement in their everyday work.

## 1. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM RESEARCH?

There is a great body of research shoving what kind of impact *high-quality ECD* has on children from poor, uneducated families; children exposed to a low quality of life in general (poor nutrition, poor life conditions, poor access to health, welfare, education services, poisoning environment, poor housing, and so on) and very often to toxic stress (mother's depression, abuse, and so on)

**Mainstream research on early childhood** indicates that:[4]

- high-quality center-based programs enhance school-related achievement and behavior of young children;
- these effects are strongest for poor children and for children whose parents have little education;
- positive benefits continue into late elementary school and high school years, although effects are smaller than they were at the beginning of elementary school.

Results on the impact of different preschool programs in the United States[5] (the Perry Preschool Program, the Carolina Abecedarian Project, the Head Start Program, and the Infant Health and Development Program) have shown that early interventions have a large impact on the future academic achievement of the participating children (including drop-out rates), criminal rates, and median wages. These programs are particularly effective since they are focused on "critical" periods in early in life, which are optimal for the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills later in life (competence model). When provided later in a child's life, results are diminished and costs are greater. These interventions support parents and families who do not have money of their own to invest in their children's education and who are often not aware how to best support their children's education

[4] At a presentation to the United States Congress, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn (2003), professor of Child Development at Teachers College and at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia – From UNA report, 2010.

[5] Shady report, 2006.

due to a lack of information about child development. These interventions produce high returns on investments (USD 17 for every USD 1 invested) and are especially effective for children and families from the most disadvantaged households. These early interventions contribute to improvement of parenting practices during early childhood and to the development of skills that sustain and foster human development later in life.

Other researches have shown similar results. The "**Expected Long-term Budgetary Benefits to Roma Education in Hungary"** study conducted by Kertesi and Kezdi, indicated that an investment that allows one young Roma to successfully complete secondary school will yield significant, direct long-term benefits for the national budget. According to a benchmark estimate, the government will receive HUF 19 million (EUR 70,000), in present value, in future benefits for an investment made in a four-year-old child who continues her studies after primary school instead of dropping out. The future benefits are somewhat smaller without the suggested investment in early childhood education when a young Roma person finishes vocational training school (HUF 15 million; EUR 55,000). The estimated returns are sensitive to the discount rate, the assumed wage growth, the college completion rate after secondary school, and the race-specific employment and wage differentials, which are, to some extent, due to labor market discrimination. However, even by our most conservative estimation, the future benefits will be at least *HUF 7–9 million*.[6]

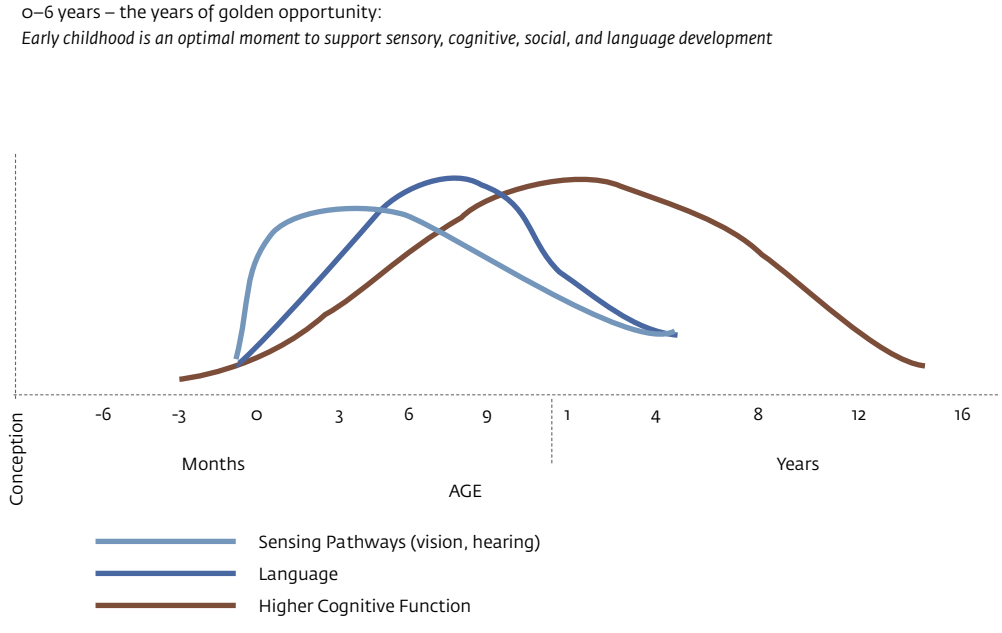
The **Roma Early Childhood Inclusion (RECI) report** states that Roma children are valuable and that Europe and its member states cannot afford to neglect their future. Due to the demographic profile of the Roma population, and the aging population of Europe and its chronic lack of labor, Roma children are an extremely valuable asset when they receive an education and are able to join the skilled workforce. Action urgently needs to be taken so that investments in the developmental readiness of Roma children for both kindergarten and school are increased and the many barriers to access public services[7] that are encountered by Roma families are eliminated.

**Neurological research** done over the past decade, confirms that critical brain and biological development occurs in the first years of a child's life, which confirms the importance of early experiences. The period from zero to three years (including pregnancy) is an optimal and critical moment for supporting infant health, as well as sensory, social, and language development, since almost 85 percent of a child's core brain structure is formed by age three. In the following figure, Professor Charles A. Nelson of the University of Minnesota, outlines the wiring (synapse formation) and sculpting of the brain in the early months and early years in respect to sensory pathways, language, and cognition. The timing of these developments is important: problems in the development of sensory pathways influence later language development, which in turn influences cognitive development.

[6] Gabor Kertesi and Gabor Kezdi (2006) *Expected Long-Term Budgetary Benefits to Roma Education in Hungary,* Roma Education Fund, pg. 10. Available at: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/kertesi-kezdi-budgetarybenefits.pdf

[7] John Bennett (2012) Roma Early Childhood Inclusion, Overview Report, OSF, REF, UNICEF, pg. 13. Available at: http://www.romachildren.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/RECI-Overview-final-WEB.pdf

FIGURE 1. Brain development in the early months and years



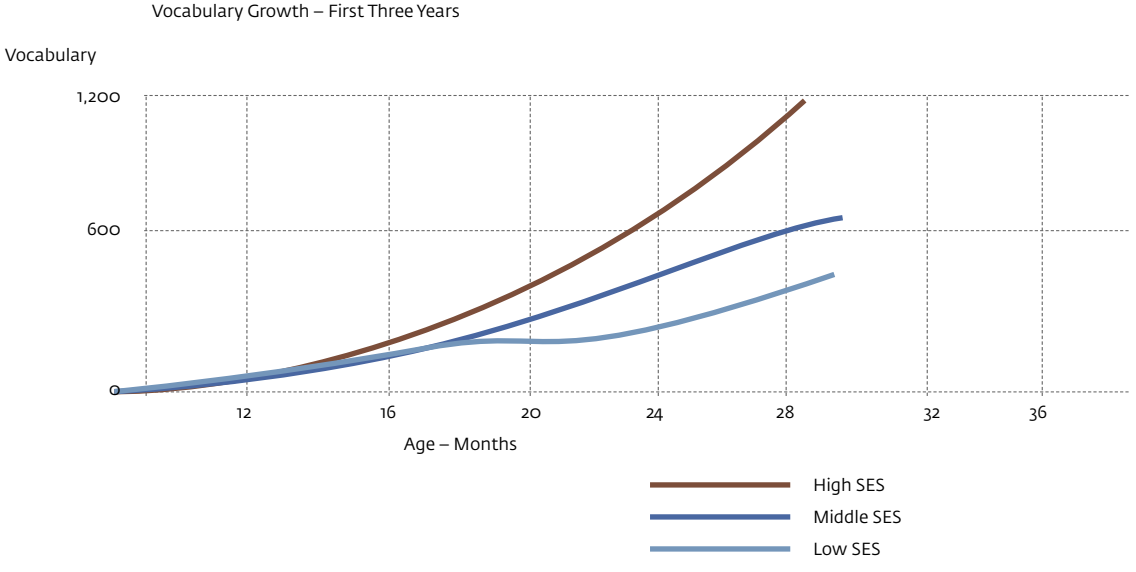

Source: C. Nelson (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, Shonkoff & Phillips.

Recent research on literacy development emphasizes our understandings of the importance of the early experiences, as it indicates that attention to language development in infancy and beyond contributes significantly to long-term literacy and reading skills in the third and fourth grades.[8] An illustration is found in a well-known study of the vocabulary development in low-income children between the ages of 12 and 36 months.[9] Based on monthly visits to these children's homes, the researchers estimated that children from advantaged homes had productive vocabularies of 766 words at 30 months and children from low-income homes had productive vocabularies of 357 words. More significantly for schooling was the finding that between 30 and 36 months, the productive vocabularies of each group of children grew by approximately 50 percent, giving children with larger vocabularies roughly 350 new words, and children with smaller vocabularies an increase of only 168 words. Despite growing at comparable rates, the children from the less advantaged homes were destined to make language gains that were less than half of those made by their more affluent peers.

[8] Campbell and Ramey 1994; Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998; Snow 2001; Takahinishi 2004; Dickinson & Neuman 2005, BvLF 2008.
[9] Hart and Risley (1995) described in UNA report, 2010.

Accordingly, literacy acquisition that is contextualized both in oral and written language by using a holistic approach that includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing should be promoted early in children's lives.

FIGURE 2. Vocabulary growth in the early years




Source: B. Hart and T. Risley (1995) *Meaningful Differences in Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*.

ECD provisions and programs can also compensate for the effects of poverty on early childhood development. Studies on the effects of poverty on children in their earliest years are also starting to show how poverty makes the gap between children who live under and above the poverty line even larger.

This means that the issue of quality of services for children living in poverty, and for children belonging to marginalized groups, is paramount. Children can benefit only if high-quality early experiences are present. *Poor-quality ECD services and programs may do more harm than good.* For children from poor families, quality means making sure that children have equal opportunities to participate in ECD services, and also that they benefit from these experiences in ways that promote their development and learning so that they can realize equal outcomes.[10] For example, the study on the *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education* (EPPE), in the UK, shows that **although children's academic achievement is influenced by the family's ethnicity, variations in ethnicity tend to become**

[10] OECD 2001, pg. 135.

**less important in the face of socio-economic variation**.[11] More importantly, this study shows that such socio-economic variations may be significantly reduced by high-quality early childhood services with **well-qualified staff who respect diversity.**

For our target group – vulnerable Roma children – this finding is of great importance because it demonstrates that **preschool education can make a real difference** for them, their present and their future, and that provisions made by practitioners to cater for diversity are especially effective in overcoming disadvantage.[12]

To meet the needs of disadvantaged Roma children, J. Bennett in the RECI report[13] suggests that effective kindergartens and schools for excluded children need clear goals, high-quality instruction, expanded services, outreach services for parents, and appropriate pedagogies. A free place in kindergarten should be provided for at least two years to every child coming from an "absolute poverty" background.

For children from ages three to six, it would mean: access to quality early learning opportunities in public kindergartens; a safe, hygienic, and stimulating environment; qualified care providers; a quality curriculum; a developmentally appropriate and interactive curriculum; a culturally and linguistically sensitive curriculum; a gender sensitive curriculum; active parental participation; and continuous assessment of program quality and child development outcomes.[14]

When it comes to providing high-quality services to young children, especially to those children from disadvantaged groups, some of the primary, and most challenging, questions for practitioners often are: "What is early preschool education about?" and "What is the purpose of preschool services and institutions?"

## *REFLECTION 2*

In your kindergarten team open a dialogue by posing the questions mentioned above. Discuss with your group and listen to them carefully. This dialogue is going to help you understand why you are doing your work in the way you do, and why others are doing what they do. This will also help everyone define what they want to achieve as individual preschool teachers, as well as a team. Through dialogue, you and your colleagues can come to common understandings and identify the common ground you are going to build on. You should also pose these questions to your students' parents. It will help you understand what their expectations are.

[11] Iram Siraj-Blatchford 2006.
[12] Iram Siraj-Blatchford 2004.
[13] John Bennett (2012) Roma Early Childhood Inclusion, Overview Report, OSF, REF, UNICEF. Available online: http://www.romachildren.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/RECI-Overview-final-WEB.pdf
[14] *Ibid.*, pg. 15.

*Comment*

... If you believe that preschool education is supposed to prepare children for school, you may focus on "school model" teaching and lecturing your students, which may cause you to try even harder when it comes to marginalized Roma children in an effort to compensate for what they are missing. You may be disappointed to find that your results are poor.

... If you think that preschool institutions are intended for children whose parents are working, you may focus on the needs of children from middle-class families or children who belong to the dominant culture, resulting in a mono-cultural and non-inclusive group or classroom. This setting may make it difficult to really involve Roma children and their parents.

Are there any alternate possibilities?

### Goals of preschool education

Based on research and discussions in the arena of ECD it is possible to say that main **goals of high-quality preschool education** should be:

- Provide support for the **holistic development** of the child and his/her well-being by creating conditions in which each child can develop his/her own capacities, and construct knowledge about his/herself and others in the world they share;
- Provide both for **care and education** for the child;
- **Empower families**, learning with and from them, while working together in the best interest of the child as equal partners;
- Promote each **child's dignity, autonomy, initiative, sense of individuality, and multiple identities** (respecting and supporting development of child's multiple belongings);
- Set the stage for **lifelong learning**, while developing lifelong learning competences, including interpersonal and civic competences, awareness about environmental issues and sustainable development, intercultural understanding, entrepreneurship, and information and communication technology (ICT) skills; and
- Develop **each child's full potential,** which is necessary to later benefit the development of the whole society.

When working with children, educators need to clarify their aims and the **early learning and development goals** that they are trying to achieve. Early learning and developmental goals are often defined in national documents and are similar, more or less, in all countries. In the document "Every Child Matters" (underpinned by the UK's Children Act 2004),[15] the five outcomes that children and young people identified as crucial to their well-being in childhood and later in life are:

[15] Available at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/31/contents

– being healthy
– staying safe
– enjoying and achieving
– making a positive contribution
– achieving economic well-being

All practitioners working with children and their families have a responsibility to provide services that will achieve these outcomes. In most documents early learning goals refer to the following areas:

– physical and motor development
– social and emotional development
– logical and mathematical development
– language, communication, and literacy development
– development of critical and creative thinking

All these goals have ***inclusiveness*** as their underpinning value**.** But what is ***inclusiveness*** and why is it needed?

According to Jill Van den Brule (UNESCO 2007), an **inclusive education** can be defined as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing their participation in their education and by reducing exclusion within, and from, education. It means that inclusive preschool education is not about integrating some children into the mainstream educational system, but about promoting the transformation of the educational system so that it is accommodating of the diversity of all learners. For that to happen it is important to critically reflect on existing practices and concepts and how they can be changed. We may begin by understanding:

– **What is a "normal/average" child of certain age?** When we use this term we are usually reflecting the values of what is seen as normal by the dominant group in society; it assumes that all children have the same opportunities and experiences, which is not the case. Without the social construct of "normality," other social constructs such as "special needs" would not exist. In this construct, however, if a child is not normal, then s/he has "special needs."
– **Children's potential as a continuum:** Is any child normal or average in all domains or is any child gifted in some areas and less gifted in others? If we perceive children's potential on a continuum, then we can shift our focus to using a continuum of teaching strategies, rather than labeling children as "normal" or as having "special needs."
– In inclusive classroom settings, teachers educate and support **every child**; they build on each child's capabilities and address his/her knowledge and skills based on their unique life experiences. Preschool teachers monitor children and follow their needs and pace of development. Instead of using a "deficit model" (reflecting on weaknesses, what is missing, or what child does not know and cannot do) they use a model that builds on child's/children's strengths (reflecting on strengths, what they can do, and what they already know).

When it comes to Roma children, in many educational systems, the ***deficit model approach*** is dominant. Pre/school teachers, when describing or assessing many vulnerable and disadvantaged Roma children, usually start by defining what these children do not know or what these children are missing – for example: they do not know how to hold pencils and books; they hardly speak; their hygiene habits are lacking; they cannot wash their hands; their attention span is limited and very short; and so on. The same happens with disadvantaged Roma parents. From the perspective of many preschool teachers, they are not competent, they do not have formal education, so they must not know anything. In some cases, Roma parents are not invited to the kindergarten to work with their children, participate in joint activities, and so on for this reason.

## *REFLECTION 3*

Please take a piece of paper and divide it in three columns.

On the top of your paper write the **name of a Roma child** and then, **in first column,** write down **everything that child knows**. Do not focus only on academic knowledge and skills; try to also think about other knowledge and skills the child has. For example: some Roma children from Roma settlements, are able to differentiate between ferrous metals of high value and cheaper, non-ferrous metals by the age of five or six. At this age many Roma children can also clean, retrieve, and identify spare parts.[16] Disadvantaged Roma children of four or five years may already know how to take care of their younger siblings; they may know how to calculate the prices of different products at the market; and they may know the basics of trade and can negotiate prices at the market. Some young Roma children may become independent at a very early age; they know how to use public transportation and how to travel to different parts of the city; they may have good orientation and the ability to recognize potential threats.

**In the second column** write down **what they do not know**, and again try not to focus only on academic achievements...

**In the third column** write down **what you would like them to learn** and **how you are going to help them** learn by building on their strength and knowledge. For example, how you can use their knowledge in trade to introduce written numbers and math concepts, or how to use the fact that they like to learn through concrete, hands-on activities. You can use your team meetings to discuss strategies you can develop with colleagues. The moment you start to recognize and appreciate what your student knows, their self-esteem will grow as well as their achievements.

[16] Adams et al. (1975) p. 96.

You can do a similar exercise to find out what disadvantaged Roma parents know, what they do not know and what you would like them to learn and how you can support them in that process. Focus especially on mothers as a large percentage of Roma woman are particularly disadvantaged due to a lack of education, jobs, and rights. Use their knowledge to motivate them to learn together with their children.

Within A Good Start in Hungary, in Your Story modules (also known as MESÉD), Roma and non-Roma mothers practice reading children's stories and the facilitator helps them to discuss the early childhood education and care issues raised in the books. The mothers then read the tales to their children and in the meantime they improve their writing, reading, and comprehension competencies.

## 2. HIGH-QUALITY PRACTICE – WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

We have mentioned high-quality practice many times and now we will explain what we mean when we use the term. When it comes *to* ***inclusion*** – high-quality provision of care and pedagogical practice is a must! Both structural issues and teaching characteristics have to be taken in account. Structural issues refer to things such as the child to adult ratio, working conditions, and so forth. When it comes to *quality pedagogy* it is much more difficult to identify ways to inspire excellence.

In this guide we are going to use the document ***Competent Educators of the 21st Century: Principles of Quality Pedagogy***[17] to define quality practice through **seven focus areas**:

- Interactions;
- Family and Community Involvement;
- Inclusion, Diversity, and Values of Democracy;
- Teaching Strategies;
- Assessment and Planning;
- Learning Environment; and
- Teachers' Professional Development.

We will explain each of these areas in detail later in the guide.

[17] This document, which was published by the International Step by Step Association (www.issa.nl), is a framework document developed mainly by experts in working in non-governmental organizations in Central Eastern European countries and Central Asia, all members of ISSA, and defines what means quality practices in early childhood settings based on their 15 years of expertise in implementing a child-centered early childhood philosophy.

These seven areas promote practices that are guided by humanistic and socio-constructivist principles, which emphasize a child-centered, holistic approach, a developmentally appropriate practice, co-construction of knowledge and development, and the idea that learning occurs through meaningful interaction with others and the physical environment. Learning is perceived as a *dialogue between children and adults*, as well as among children, marked by respect for each other. Learning is stimulating and gives autonomy to the learner. The purpose of learning is not to produce future citizens because children are already competent, full citizens today as they continuously learn, with support from adults.

These seven areas should be perceived as equally important, interconnected, and interdependent pieces of the ***Puzzle of Quality***; if one is missing, the picture is incomplete and there is no quality. On the other hand, if you start to work deeply and seriously on one focus area, improvements in others will also occur.

## *REFLECTION 4*

Please **choose one of the seven focus areas** and think about what improvements you would make in your practices around that specific area.[18] For example, if you decide to improve your teaching strategies by introducing innovative strategies that promote different approaches to children's learning or more individualization, you will find that:

- You need to learn more about these new strategies (Focus Area 7: Professional Development)
- You have to change the learning environment of your classroom (Focus Area 6: Learning Environment)
- You will have to think about how to improve your monitoring of children's progress and the way in which you plan your teaching (Focus Area 5: Assessment and Planning)
- You will have to discuss more with children and provide them with more opportunities to communicate amongst themselves (Focus Area 1: Interactions)

And so on... and at the end you will realize your practice will be more inclusive. **Because quality also means inclusiveness!**

The issue of quality practice can be analyzed in different ways, but in this guide we'll show that **there is no quality without inclusiveness**!

[18] See all focus areas from *Competent Educators of the 21st Century: ISSA's Definition of Quality Pedagogy.* Available at: http://www.issa.nl/docs_pdfs/Pedagogical-Standards-final-WEB.pdf.

# CHAPTER 3: OPENING DOORS – THE KEY IS HIGH-QUALITY, INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

***Inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights. Within the field of education this is reflected in the development of strategies that seek to bring about a genuine equalization of opportunity.***

The Salamanca World Statement (UNESCO 1994: 11) – signed by 92 governments

## *REFLECTION 5*

To develop an inclusive approach, you should be able to answer YES to following questions:

Do you strongly believe that:

- Every child can learn and reach high educational outcomes?
- Education institutions need to adjust/prepare/be ready for children rather than children having to be ready for schools?
- Children and families differ from each other in many ways, and those differences are valuable resources, not roadblocks?
- The different educational needs and capacities of children and their different paces of development and learning can be met by using various teaching strategies?

Did you answer YES to every question? If not, what kind of support would be helpful? Where are you going to look for help and support?

To be able to learn, develop and realize their full potential **children attending kindergartens need**:

- Diverse, warm, caring, and responsive interactions with adults and peers that promote both children's cognitive and social/emotional development,
- A rich, stimulating learning environment, that is both psychologically and physically safe, where children can develop a sense of belonging, high self-esteem, and a strong positive self and group identity,
- Democratic relationships that are based on opportunities for participation and respect for diversity,
- Respect for the families and communities that the children belong to, and the participation of their family members in the kindergarten's life,
- Opportunities to learn by being exposed to various learning contexts that build on their individual learning styles, developmental level, interests, and needs,
- An assessment of their achievements that promotes their successes, and plans work which will give them opportunities to grow and learn,
- Highly competent and dedicated preschool teachers who care for them and enjoy working with them (warm professionals[19]).

And, above all, they need ***hope* for a better future and trust** that they themselves can do something to make their dreams come true, especially if they are from a disadvantaged group like Roma children.
Further on in this text we will try to briefly explain all aspects of quality, one by one.

**Let's play...**

– One child was not collaborating with the other children. The preschool teachers prepared a range of activities connected with their favorite professions. The teacher motivated children through discussion to share their idea of their future profession and then she encouraged them to role play their favorite occupation. The rules of the game are invented by the children themselves; the teacher is only observing and motivating a child who is usually quiet and uncooperative to express his opinion. This activity can be used to raise child's self- confidence.
Kindergarten Snezana, Macedonia

## 1. INTERACTIONS

Warm and loving interactions help children develop secure attachments with their preschool teachers as well as with other adults and peers. Leavers state that there are two main factors that influence how children are doing in kindergartens: how they are feeling (well-being) and how engaged they are in their activities (involvement). Interactions that are warm and caring,

[19] Jan Peeters (2008) *De warme professional*, Academia Press. Available at: http://www.vbjk.be/nl/node/2843

> that offer children opportunities to respond as individuals with their own interests, experiences, preferences, and opinions, allow children to develop a sense of belonging and well-being. Interactions that encourage children to expand their thinking about, and knowledge, of topics, as well as their use of conversational language, increase children's involvement in activities. These kinds of interactions are what make the difference between high level and lower level quality in kindergartens.

The type of interactions that occur between teachers and children also defines the type of learning approach promoted in kindergarten. Is the learning approach child-centered or teacher-centered? A child-centered approach means that preschool teacher puts the child at the center of whatever they do, that they are guided in their actions by what they learn about the child, and that they then use all their professional means (curriculum, learning and assessment strategies, learning environment, family partnership, team work, and so on) to support the child's learning and development.

In child-centered settings, interactions play a crucial role, because children naturally learn through interactions! Interactions are not about the delivery of information or pieces of knowledge, they are about creating an environment where children can learn from others, whether peers or adults. That is why different types of children groupings (large group, small groups, pairs, individual work) are often recommended to be used during the day. When teachers only rely on large group settings, they lose the opportunity to have children be more involved in the activities, to develop their individual language skills, and to feel that their knowledge and preferences are heard and taken into account.

**High-quality interactions promote:**

– A healthy self-concept in children and high-self esteem
– A feeling of physical and emotional safety and respect during the learning process
– Positive and meaningful social interactions
– Cognitive development and a higher order level of thinking, along with critical thinking
– A child's initiative and autonomy

## *REFLECTION 6*

**Let's focus for a while on the powerful tools connected with the quality of interactions. Think of the way you usually interact with children and how you engage them in conversations and activities.**

**Do you usually...**

– **Use open ended questions** to invite thoughtful and extended answers? How long do you wait for the child to answer? Do you give them enough time, or just a few seconds? Do you already have the right answer in mind or can there be multiple answers to one question?

– Engage children in **meaningful conversations which encourage them to contribute** their own experiences, knowledge, opinions, and preferences to the discussion?

– **Observe children's interest** in specific topics or things/objects and ask them questions based on those observations?

– Follow the **children's lead** in conversations and discussions, instead of dictating where the discussion will go?

– Engage in real two-way conversations with children where they have as much time to talk as you? Create play opportunities and activities for children where **every child expresses and contributes** with his ideas and views based on his/her personal experiences and imagination? (For example, different roles, different tasks, different ways of solving a problem.)

– **React to individual** children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs (For example, accommodating different children's need for more activity or quiet, for a slower or faster pace, for more or less challenging activities, and so on.)

– Notice when **individual children need more help** or more of a challenge and make adjustments accordingly?

– Plan for how to provide opportunities for every child to make meaningful **choices** (activities, themes, materials, places to work, whom to work with, how long to stay on an activity) that are appropriate to the children's ages and capabilities.

– Make certain that each child takes on meaningful **roles in group** learning activities?
– Involve children in creating classroom **responsibilities, rules, and routines** and letting them make decisions on how to put them into effect?
– Give **positive feedback** on initiatives taken by children by showing interest, asking questions, admiring, and giving affirmation?
– Plan and design activities for children where they must **cooperate, collaborate**, and care for each other, even if they are a diverse group?
– Intervene in situations when issues of **exclusion** occur among children and assist them to resolve the problem?
– Encourage children to support **each other's learning**, including asking for information or assistances from a peer?
– Help children **appreciate the contributions** of their peers, by asking them to generate a group story, for example.

Experience has shown that frequently placing children in small groups and in pairs has a good impact on vulnerable Roma children for many reasons:
– Children quickly become part of the group, because they have opportunity to mix with other children, to be in different groups, and in pairs with different children.
– They feel secure and accepted because there is always time for individual contact with their preschool teacher.
– They fulfill their need for physical contact both with peers and preschool teachers.
– They enjoy participating in concrete and meaningful conversations.
– Other children feel comfortable mixing and working with Roma children.
– They feel protected because the preschool teacher intervenes when exclusion occurs.

## 2. FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

IMPORTANT!

Family and community involvement is about building and nourishing strong partnerships among preschool teachers, families, and other community members because it is essential for children's learning and development. Recognizing the role of the home environment and family as the first educational and social setting for children, the preschool teacher builds bridges between the school and family/community to promote continual two-way communication.

Parent and family involvement goes beyond participating in the activities, events, and programs that happen in the kindergarten because families are recognized as the first educators of their children. Partnerships with families are crucial since children should not feel torn between their families' and their educational institution's cultures; they should not feel pushed into choosing one culture over the other. Children need consistency among family and kindergarten values and practices.

In A Good Start Project, in Shuto Orizari, teachers started inviting parents into their kindergarten classrooms on a regular basis to participate in the activities and to follow their children's behavior in group activities. Through these visits, parents developed positive approaches and communication with their children. They expressed their gratitude for this opportunity to develop positive parental skills and to become friends with other parents. Even their younger children, who are still not enrolled in kindergarten activities, were allowed to participate and to develop an interest in these kinds of activities.

### Learning about family and community values and culture

Make a ***Family Wall in the classroom***: Ask children and parents to bring photos which represent the child's life, family, community. If they don't have the means to do it, ask for they permission to assist them. Use this wall of photos to start conversations with the children about their lives and their families; organize activities so that all children can look, listen, and ask one another questions. Use the wall to show appreciation of each child's uniqueness; talk with children about commonalities they see as well as differences that exist among them. Bring a photo of your family and present it to children.

*In one of the groups there was a Roma child who was not really accepted by rest of the group. He was an outsider until his preschool teacher developed a family wall. The child brought a photo of his family and the animals they were taking care of. That was the first time the child spoke passionately about any topic, demonstrating a huge body of knowledge and expertise. He impressed his peers and became very popular in the group.*

Using a ***poster or map of the country***, ask parents to work together with children to mark places where they come from (towns, villages), and where they have family and friends. You can use a map of the world too, and do a similar activity. This activity is very important for migrant and/or refugee children because they can keep connections with the place they came from and demonstrate the social network to which they belong.

When it comes to cooperating with families high-quality practice means that preschool teachers promote partnerships with families and provide a variety of opportunities for families and community members to be involved in children's learning and development. They invite and welcome family members into the classroom on a daily basis.

As a part of the Home Preschool Community Liaison Program in Hungary, mothers and fathers present preschool lessons of their choice (such as baking, fishing, mask-making, and so on) at the mainstream preschool or kindergarten. This program helps build trust between the kindergarten teachers and the Roma community, and also encourages the parents to be more involved in their child's education.

They include parents and families in planning and decision-making processes related to their child in particular, in addition to finding ways for them to participate in decisions about what happens in the classroom of educational center in general. This kind of participation, where families become part of the learning community, builds bridges between the family and school culture as well as assuring that the families' and communities' interests, abilities, and cultures are an integral part of the children's learning process.

**How you can improve your work with families and communities? Some suggestions...**

- Work with families as much as you can and as often as you can... be aware that you will never be able to find one model to fit all the parents.
- Learn as much as you can about children, parents and families; learn about the culture of the communities, ethnic groups, and families children come from. Learn FROM them about these topics and not only by READING and TALKING about them. Use this knowledge as much as you can.
- Include fathers and/or male family members. Create space for them to actively participate (for example, Father's Day).
- Look at your classroom/kindergarten as a meeting place for parents and community, and as a very important and integral part of a child's life. Look at it as a place for exchanging ideas, values, dreams, and plans. Talk with parents and listen to their ideas and advice, and then, together, decide what you are going to include in your plans.
- When you talk about cooperation with families, be very specific; do not talk in general terms, but in very precise terms about who you want to include and how, whether its mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, siblings, or anyone that you think is important to the children.
- Develop and display monthly plans of classroom activities, including thematic projects with specific opportunities for family members' involvement.
- Post welcoming signs and send thank-you letters to acknowledge the contributions of family

members to the classroom.
– Use parent/family surveys to find out how families would like to be involved, and use that information to facilitate their participation.
– Develop a system for learning parents' goals for their children (through parent-teacher conferences, written communication, regular phone calls, and so on) and incorporate those goals into classroom activities.
– Ask parents to join you and the children when you arrange their learning environment, classroom, and kindergarten so that their values, goals, and concerns are addressed.
– Share group rules, program goals, and extracurricular activities with families and ask them to plan how they might contribute.
– Individualize communication with families to accommodate their schedules, languages spoken at home, and other special circumstances
– Offer information to parents/families about the latest research and scientific arguments connected with child development and learning
– Organize a network of mutual support for parents, and invite them to talk to each other and share their experiences; if possible, provide space and time for parents to socialize with each other in the classroom; you can also make kindergarten resources, such as toys, books, puzzles, games, and so on, more available to parents.
– Keep all private/personal **information** about families and children **confidential.**
– Never discuss the confidential information about a child's family with others who are not professionals and who do not need to know the information (for example, do not gossip about families).
– Regularly invite various members of the community to the school to expand children's learning.
– Create opportunities for children and families to take initiative and actively engage in community events and activities.
– Use community resources and family culture to enrich children's development and learning experiences.
– Collect, organize, and disseminate information about various services that are available for families and children in the community.

### Community mediators – key people for strengthening teachers' work with families and communities

Mediators are important professionals with whom teachers should work very closely. In some countries there are school mediators, in other countries, health mediators or community mediators. All these professionals work very closely with Roma families and have very useful information about the community and families where children live and grow. The mutual sharing of information and common actions can greatly support teachers' work if planned in close cooperation with mediators.

For a better understanding of a child's home environment and ways to effectively involve parents and community in child's learning and development, teachers need to cross the border of the kindergarten space and learn more about the uniqueness of each family.

By involving mediators in common actions and participating in community events, teachers can find answers to many of the questions around what could work and would not work in approaching each family.

The teachers and mediators encouraged the parents of children with difficulties to meet and talk to each other and to talk with the parents of children – without difficulties. Together, they discussed possible collaborative efforts to help the children and they shared examples of positive practices to inspire collaboration. The experience that one mother shared was very inspiring for the parents whose children refused to go to the kindergarten. She said:

> "My son adores going to the kindergarten so much that he has to be convinced that the kindergarten isn't open on weekends, so I have to take him there every Sunday to show him the locked door."

Suto-Orizari, Macedonia

## 3. DEMOCRATIC VALUES, INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT AND PRACTICE, AND RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY

Democratic values, an inclusive environment and practice, and respect for diversity define how preschool teachers can, and should, work on promoting the right of every child and family to be included, respected, and valued, to participate, to work toward common goals, and to reach their full potential with a special focus on the most vulnerable.

The preschool teacher serves as a model and assures that, through everyday experiences, children learn to appreciate and value diversity, and develop the skills to participate in society as active citizens.

There is an old saying that "*Every change starts within.*" Every choice or decision educators make in the classroom – including what kind of interactions they will have with children and families, what kind of learning environment they will provide and what teaching strategies they will use – is deeply influenced by their beliefs. Teacher's beliefs that strongly influence children's success are:

– *Expectations for children* – Having in mind what is age appropriate for children to be able to do and learn at each specific age. Preschool teachers should have high expectations for every child. They should not oversimplify tasks or activities in an effort to protect children from disappointment just because they think that children cannot be successful. Lowering expectations, even if they are made with best intentions, can be very dangerous, especially for children

coming from marginalized groups. They represent a discriminatory practice that should not be tolerated. By having different expectations for different children, educators may inadvertently provide an unequal education for children in the same classroom. Research[20] indicates that there is a strong link between how educators perceive children and children's actual academic outcomes. Educators' attitudes toward children can become self-fulfilling prophecies: girls go into certain professions and boys into others; children from disadvantaged backgrounds are never able to break the cycle of poverty; and children from some families and communities go on to receive a higher education, while others don't. Educators have to become aware of what is referred to as a "hidden curriculum," which often reflects and exacerbates these circumstances from and in society, and provides some children with lesser-quality learning experiences than others[21] (Nieto 1996). The "hidden curriculum" is the part of the curriculum that educators are not aware they are teaching, but which reproduces current power structures.

– *Image of the child* – Like a majority of adults, many preschool teachers believe that children are helpless and have limited competences. Thus, they do not provide them with opportunities to authentically participate in learning experiences, decision-making processes, and a social life in their group and kindergarten. They are usually treated as somebody who has to be taken care of. Kindergarten teachers (as well as some parents) sometimes become very unhappy and frustrated because they assume that they have to do everything for children and they must continuously control them. This sends children the message that, on the one hand, they are not respected and not taken seriously, and that, on the other hand, they can do whatever they want since they are not responsible for anything. Children have to be trusted as partners in learning. Long-term learning outcomes rely on their active involvement. They learn by looking at adults, by trying, by doing!

Childhood experiences are our foundation for a sense of belonging. Some authors state that the early years are the most critical for establishing one's sense of connectedness to others, for establishing self-worth, and a sense of belonging to a wider community.

Educational settings play a critical role in building this sense of belonging. If children do not feel connected, respected, safe, loved, and appreciated, they are blocked and do not progress. Inclusive, non-segregated education is critical for self-awareness and understanding others. Preschool teachers should be skilled in openly discussing every topic and in answering the questions of all children, no matter how inconvenient they may be.

[20] K. Zeicherner (1996) "Educating Teachers to Close the Achievement Gap: Issues of Pedagogy Achievement, Knowledge, and Teacher Preparation." In B. Williams (Ed.) *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision for Changing Beliefs and Practices.* Alexandra, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, pp. 56–76.

[21] S. Nieto (2000) Placing Equity Front and Center, Some Thoughts on Transforming Teacher Education for a New Century, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51; 180; str. 180 – 187, SAGE, AACTE

## Supporting Children's Personal and Cultural Identity and Sense of Belonging

**Please read the following suggestions and try them in your daily practice:**

– **Be very careful when you use the child's name**, be sure that you are not making mistakes, and that you are pronunciation is accurate. Do not give children nicknames unless they asked to be called by that name. Do not allow children to call each other names or to use nicknames. You can ask parents to write down the ***Story of my name*** for their child: what their name means, how the child got it, why and from whom. You can ask children, with the help of their parents, to draw their name. If parents are illiterate or do not feel comfortable with writing, you can talk to them and write down their story, or help them find someone in their community to do it for them. Exhibit the drawings and the stories about the children's names or make them into a class book about names. You can use the book to promote the culture and traditions of families (what are common names, what are the traditions in giving names, who gives the name to the child, and so on.)

– **Be respectful of the first language (mother tongue) of children in your group**. Language is very powerful and closely connected with identity. All languages are not respected in the same way – for example, if the first language of a child is the dominant language in the country, both preschool teachers and children feel comfortable, but if a child's first language is Romanes, then a lot of problems can occur. Children need to hear their own language and to feel that their language is part of the school culture. Take care of the needs of bilingual children in your group. If you do not speak the Romani language, you can always ask some parents or someone from the community to help you. You can develop a list of words and expressions that are important for them (for example, greetings, words of acceptance, respect, and appreciation) with children and parents. Then you can translate them into the dominant language with pictures of what the words are, create a ***dictionary of words,*** and place it somewhere in the room where both you and the children can easily refer to it. You can put bilingual signs and labels on toys and activity centers. You can ask parents and community members to record songs, lyrics, sayings, and so on, in the Romani language (and in all other languages children in your group speak). While you are working on supporting children who are learning a second language (the language of instruction in the country), ask parents and family and community members to talk with the child in their first language. The most harmful thing that can be done is to decrease the amount of input a child receives in their first language. Research shows that the more children are supported in their home language, the better they will do in academics in the second language.[22] Explain to parents that your goal is not to make

[22] From Socrates Programme – Comenius 2.1 project "Effective Teaching and Learning for Minority-language Children in Preschool," ISSA.

child switch from one language to another (giving up mother tongue), but to enrich the child by teaching them an additional language.

– **Ensure that the learning environment depicts all children's backgrounds** and reflects the everyday reality of a child's life (no out of context images) to support and validate his/her daily experiences.
– **Ask children to bring something important to them from home.** Do not judge the value of the artifact they have brought, but use it to involve the child in a conversation about values that they share with their community.
– **Be sure that the materials you use in the classroom (toys, objects, books, images, photos, and so on) reflect all children's background.** Use toys and materials which represent children from your group, their families, and the communities they come from (for example, dolls of different skin and hair colors, puzzles with pictures from the Roma community, and so on). Use books and materials in which children can find other children who look like them, as well as children who look different (different shapes and sizes, different skin colors, and so on). Together with children (and sometimes parents), create books which represent their skills, strengths, wishes, and so on.
– **Nourish the traditions of the communities and families that the children come from**. Collect music, traditional songs, lullabies, traditional games, customs, stories, and sayings. Ask parents to help you. They can sing for you so that you can record the music and use it in everyday activities. They can record games, sayings, and stories from the community. If parents cannot read and write, try to find someone in their community who can. Do not use what you collect only on special occasions (such as holidays), but integrate it into everyday work. For example: when children are going to sleep let them listen to the music they like; use traditional games as warm-up activities.
– **Include or refer to aspects of all the children's identities in activities**: Casual conversations, stories told and read, food, art, music, and dramatic play props and themes. For example, facilitate children by giving opportunities to talk about different ways of play and activities at home. However, do not assume that because several families are involved in one kind of activity, that all families will also be involved. There is diversity among all of us. Just because a person is Roma does not mean that they will act the same as all other Roma, just as a person from the dominant group does not act the same as everyone else from the dominant group. We tend to stereotype people who are from the non-dominant group much more than those who are from the dominant group.
– **Ask children to explore what makes them different and what makes them the same** in the group, let them explore differences and similarities in their looks, skin, hair, eye color, use pencils which represent those colors, and make together a drawing like **"All the colors of our group."**
– **Organize activities that will make children proud as much as possible**. Ask them to share their individual skills and successes.

– **Collect examples showing people of different backgrounds in position of success.** (For example, Roma people who have finished university and have well-paid jobs, people with disabilities climbing high mountains and participating in sport activities, and so on.) If children have only negative images of people with the same background as theirs, they feel ashamed of their culture and do not want to assert or keep their identity.
– **Be aware of gender equality**. Engage in activities with both boys and girls in mixed groups. Avoid stereotypical divisions of activities and toys based on gender. Offer both boys and girls all toys and activities. Use gender-sensitive language – avoid language that only uses the male gender. When you name professions, use both genders, so that children start to understand that some professions are not only for men.
– **Be aware that the children you are working with may have different socio-economic backgrounds**, so avoid asking questions like "Did you have nice holidays at the sea side?" or "How do you like to decorate your room?" This might make some children whose families are less wealthy feel embarrassed by implicitly showing that you think that all children have the opportunity to go to the seaside or that they all have their own rooms and the money to decorate them.
– **If you have children in your group who need additional support, do not overprotect them or feel sorry for them**. Do not think for them or instead of them, but put your efforts into empowering them and encouraging them to become independent. Treat them with respect and develop empathy for their feelings and needs.
– **Use photos and posters representing people from different communities and/or groups in non-biased and non-stereotypical way**. (For example, elderly people playing games, holding hands or dancing; "poor people" who are playing with children, or having fun; overweight people engaging in sports or dancing; men changing diapers and/or cleaning; woman piloting a plane; Roma people working as medical doctors or/teachers, and so on.) It is very important to represent each group of people and every child in your group with a variety of different non-stereotypical images.

**What's the name of this object?**

One Roma child in the kindergarten group could not understand the Macedonian language. Thus, the preschool teachers prepared cards with a drawing of a particular object and wrote its name in the Macedonian and Romani languages. Children guessed the name of the object. This made it possible for the children to learn the Macedonian word and the Romani word for the same object and to understand the differences between both alphabets. This activity helped the Roma child to learn new words in Macedonian. He was also glad that his culture was appreciated in the same manner when Macedonian children learned Romani words.

Kindergarten Snezana, Macedonia

№ 41

As a part of quality practice preschool teachers focus also on developing skills and knowledge among children on how to treat their peers with dignity, how to respect diversity, and how to take care of people and the environment. To be responsible citizens, children need to feel connected with the local community from an early age, with the people within. Help them to become engaged with parents, teachers, and peers in activities that can contribute to the benefit of all.

**Support children in developing respect for diversity by...**

– Observing children's interactions in peer groups. Focus on situations when children are accepted and when they are excluded. Try to find reasons for being included or excluded and develop activities to create situations when children get together and learn how to feel comfortable with differences.
– If children are using biased, labeling, and offensive language, if they are bothering children from a minority group, or any child for any reason, react immediately. Interrupt the activity and clearly state that this is unacceptable. Talk with children and try to find other ways for treating each other. Also, explore the feelings that children have. Be sure that children understand how deeply words can hurt. Give comfort to the child or children who were hurt.
– Encourage children to use language that is based on facts, and motivate them by modeling language that does not use labels and interpretations.
– Be aware of the language you are using even when it comes to the simplest activities and instructions (for example, instead of saying, "Cross out what does not belong to this group of objects," say: "Circle what is different.")

For situations where children feel excluded, bullied, or when their feeling get hurt, storytelling or reading stories, as well as organizing puppet shows, can be very useful for showing children how to behave differently. The **transformative discussion** method[23] (Ada and Campoy 2003) can be very helpful in motivating children to reflect on topics of exclusion. It can teach children to look at stories from different perspectives: *How is my life similar to this or what do I do that is similar? How is my life different or what do I do differently? What kinds of action can I take based on what the story taught me?*

[23] A.F. Ada and F.I. Campoy (2003) *Authors in the Classroom: A Transformative Education Process*, New York: Allyn and Bacon.

## The Transformative Discussion Method

***Naming from personal experiences***

Children are more motivated to engage in discussion when it is meaningful for them. It is usually meaningful for them when they have direct experience with an issue. Teachers have to find the entry point of where children's experience lies. For instance, many children have no experience with a topic such as the destruction of the rain forest. However, they would understand the issue of not having a place to play. The problem of this disappearing habitat can be introduced to them more concretely as losing space to live and play. The children can then **name** or describe the problems that this situation might create based on their own experiences of not having their own space.

Naming questions in a discussion could include:

– Has something like this ever happened to you or to someone you know?
– How did it feel?
– What did you do and why?
– Was there something else you could have done? Why did you choose not to do it?

***Building knowledge by listening to the voices of others***

Learning to listen to others can be challenging. Teachers need to realize that it is a process that children have to learn as they may not come to school with the skill, and they may not be immediately successful. However, with patience and practice, it is possible to learn how to listen for understanding and not just to hear. A characteristic of true discussion is that students are actively involved in questioning, and a real, in-depth exploration of ideas takes place. It is not just the teacher asking questions and the students answering. Both teachers and students engage in a process of discovery. This sustained process of inquiry requires discipline from everyone because it so different from the traditional mode of students listening and responding with the "correct" answer upon request.

There are several things that teachers can do to facilitate the acquisition of listening skills:

– Modeling by really listening: in other words, "listening to understand" and not to judge or evaluate. You can do this by asking for several different responses to the same question. This communicates very clearly to students that we are not looking for "one right answer," but are more interested in their responses than completing a list of questions.
– Modeling how our ideas are inspired and influenced by others. In this process, we can build on others' ideas, or we can refine our own ideas by contrasting or disagreeing with others. For example: a teacher can say, "Peter, it sounds like your idea is similar to what Katya said earlier." Or, "Natalia, it sounds like your idea is different from Patrick's. What do the rest of you think?" Or, "What Emilia said earlier made me think about another question…"
– Being sure to make room for all voices in the classroom, including the shy ones. Teachers do this by increasing response time, encouraging children to talk to each other through techniques such as think-pair-share or having small group discussions.

We want to encourage children to look at the points of view of others in classroom discussion, but we also want children to look at the points of view of those who may not be there. Types of questions a teacher or student could ask include:

– How do you think the other person felt about this and why?
– Why might someone do something differently and why?
– Do these people have other options and, if so, what are they?
– Why do you think someone might do something that way?

***Inviting authentic action***

Everyone is frustrated and discouraged when they feel that talk is "just talk," and it does not seem to lead anywhere. People are more enthusiastic to discuss issues when they believe their ideas and concerns are being taken seriously and can truly make a difference. This kind of discussion creates an atmosphere where we all can all be proactive instead of the victims of others.

Opportunities need to be created in the classroom for students to engage in genuine decision-making and problem solving tasks about the issues that affect them. Discussion can lead to action in many ways. Some of those ways are very personal and individual rather than shared and collective.

In this final phase, the purpose of the discussion is to help children think about the aspects of their lives that they can improve, and to encourage them to make decisions with that purpose in mind. Children are perfectly capable of looking at their reality and asking themselves:

– What would I want to change?
– What could be better?
– How can I improve it?

In the early grades, these initial queries might give rise to concrete questions such as:

– How can I make new friends?
– How can I tell my friends that I don't want to be teased?
– How can I get my friends to respect my things?
– What can I do to make up after we have a fight?
– What can I do that will make me happier?
– What can I do that will help me learn more?

As children gain more experience they can think more about others and what they can do to make others feel better or have better conditions.

**To support a children's interest and care for their community you can...**

– Empower children to take care of each other, to defend each other's rights, and to react when their friends are having difficulties.
– Talk with children about actual events in their community by reading newspaper articles to them, by organizing discussions, by asking them for their opinions on issues such as the small number of kindergartens, poverty and children, poor conditions in which may children live, and what children are interested in today.
– Involve children in planning activities which will contribute to whole community (for instance, planting flowers or trees; making toys for younger children and children in community; or making greeting cards for sick children in the community).

## 4. ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING

**Assessment and planning are** important tools for promoting the ongoing processes of learning that enable every child to succeed. Preschool teachers closely monitor a child's progress, needs and interests, and plan according, keeping in mind the child's potential that need support and development, as well as the national requirements. This is explained in more in detail in the next chapter on a **Child's Portfolio**.

## 5. TEACHING STRATEGIES

Teaching strategies that promote active learning are prerequisites for every child's learning and progress as children at this age learn by doing. Teaching strategies also need to build on the belief that care, learning, and nurturing form a coherent whole, and that every child's well-being and engagement are crucial for a child's development and learning. For preschool teachers who want to implement quality pedagogy, teaching strategies are the tools that will really engage children in the learning process. Every educational goal can be reached in different ways (by taking into account different learning styles, temperaments, and personalities, for example) so every child can succeed. Preschool teachers should be open-minded and ready to explore different approaches. When thinking about teaching strategies, preschool teachers should always have a holistic approach (affecting all areas of child development) in mind and promote active learning where children have to actively participate in the process of learning, as co-constructors of knowledge and not simply passive consumers.

**Sharing a parent's experiences from *A Good Start***

At home, children started talking frequently and freely about the things they do in kindergarten: they talk about the things they learned that day; they retell the stories their teacher told them. They develop a habit of waking up early to prepare themselves for kindergarten. They develop good hygiene habits that they also practice at home. One parent discusses this experience with her daughter:

> *"She keeps tidying up her room. She organizes her toys by herself. She even tells us how to wash our hands properly:*
> *– First you put water on your hands, than the soap, she says."*
> – Macedonia

**In everything we do we teach children something! Here are some ideas to reflect on how you can better build an inclusive and nurturing learning environment, and improve your teaching.**

– **Conflict management** – let children be involved in conflict, and encourage them to deal with it. When children are in a conflict, take the following steps:
  1. Approach the situation calmly; stop any hurtful actions.
  2. Acknowledge the children's feelings without judgment.
  3. Gather information by letting all the children involved express their points of view.
  4. Restate the problem for them.
  5. Ask for possible solutions and choose one together. If the children cannot come up with good ideas for solutions, then give them some examples, offer alternative proposals, suggest compromises, or apply rules.
  6. Give follow-up help or support for reconciliation as needed.
  7. Model how children should express their feelings, needs, and points of view, and suggest ways to solve the problems. Demonstrate for the children how we can be different and think differently but still work and live together. Demonstrate for them that conflict does not inevitably mean quarrel, but that it can be an opportunity for learning and creating new relationships.
– **Building on a child's previous knowledge and experience**: Engage in dialogue with children to find out what they already know about a topic and use that knowledge to plan new activities. Encourage children to always refer to what they already know, which will make them feel powerful. You can use the KWL model (what we **k**now, what we **w**ant to know, what we **l**earned) to demonstrate what you want them to do.
– **Building trust during the process of learning**: Encourage children to speak up without fear if they don't understand or can't do something. Encourage children to try new things, to take risks, and to do things in a different way, even if they might make mistakes.
– **Offering support in the process of learning**: Provide the props and information that children

will need to accomplish an activity in advance. Provide children with activities that address their different abilities (to create, discuss, manipulate, act out), instead of expecting them to learn only by listening, watching, or completing a worksheet. Always prepare an alternative task in case you see that children cannot complete the activity you have planned. If children are not successful, do not blame them or try to change them, but try to change your way of working and planning instead. And do not blame yourself. Look at the process and think what changes you can make to better support your students.

- **Holistic approach**: Provide hands-on activities that are interconnected and use skills from different developmental areas, including: language; communication, and literacy development; logical and creative thinking; world knowledge and understanding; pre-math knowledge and skills development; and physical development, health, and well-being. (Skills are seen as transferable across these development areas.)
- **Promoting cooperation among children**: Use cooperative play, role play, and free-play to provide children with various opportunities to use a wide range of abilities (language/communication, social-emotional, cognitive). Promote cooperative games that rely on individual strengths and not competitive games that put individual children against each other; motivate children to take care of themselves while at the same time taking care of the others with team games and explain to them that taking care of others does not mean that they are not taking care of themselves.

- **Make learning joyful and interesting**: Organize activities that encourage exploration, experimentation, independent inquiry, and creativity. Provide open-ended activities that allow children to learn in multiple ways. Provide opportunities for children to get information and acquire knowledge in different ways and from a variety of resources (other people, the Internet, books, and so on).
- **Promoting higher-order thinking skills and problem solving:** Provide materials and activities that encourage children to find solutions for problematic situations.
- **Use opportunities for informal learning** outside of direct "instructional" time and out of kindergarten. Use transitions, snack time, break time, and recess to further children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Provide learning materials that are traditionally seen as indoor materials, such as books, blocks, and art supplies, in outdoor areas for children to use during recess. Acknowledge and incorporate – where appropriate – children's learning from friends, family, and community members outside of the classroom.
- **Provide children with clear information:** Tell children what they will be doing that day during the morning meeting or before an activity begins.
- **Promote self-regulation and independence in children:** Create activities where children can do things independently or with peers, and where preschool teachers are merely observers. Engage children in the process of planning their play. Involve children in defining group responsibilities and developing rules. Discuss the children's rights and responsibilities with them.

**Life in kindergarten**

The kindergarten teacher noticed that the children in her group do not respect the classroom rules and she therefore organized an activity to overcome this issue. The teacher discussed life in kindergarten and what rules should be followed in kindergarten with the children. Then the teacher encouraged the children to play while she observed their behavior, including whether or not they began to follow the classroom rules. The teacher paid attention to whether or not all children were involved in the play. At the end of this activity the teacher discussed with children how they felt during the game, whether they learned something new, and how they collaborated. The goal of this discussion was to make the children think about the rules and their implementation in the playing process. This activity can be used to stimulate cohabitation in kindergarten.

**Life in my kindergarten**

There were few Roma children that had significant problems with being separated from their parents at the beginning of their stay in kindergarten, and they could not adapt to life in kindergarten. Thus, the preschool teachers organized an activity called "Life in my kindergarten." Children played "kindergarten"; they assigned the roles themselves and created the concept of their "kindergarten." This activity is very powerful for children with adaptation problems.

Macedonia

## 6. LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The learning environment is more than classroom equipment and facility quality. It is also includes the culture and the climate in the working room. The learning environment also greatly influences children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. By creating a physically and psychologically safe and stimulating environment, preschool teachers encourage children's learning through independent and group exploration, play, access to diverse resources, and interactions with other children and adults. The room needs to be organized in such a way that all children feel *welcome, all children feel that they belong to the space, and all children feel accepted and respected*. It is important that the environment promotes: *cooperation* among children (children work together as team and learning community); *respectful communication* (children carefully listen to each other, socialize with each other outside of kindergarten, and take care of each other); *mutual respect* (children

accept each other no matter how they look, their background, their skills, or social class); *diversity of ideas* (children are not afraid of different opinions, they are not angry or aggressive when they cannot agree, and they deal with conflict in a constructive way); *sharing* (children trust each other and speak freely about themselves, their feelings, and experiences); and plenty of *relevant, appropriate, and structured and unstructured materials* (such as boxes, wires, plastic bottles, papers, and additional materials) that show the members of the classroom and who belongs there with photos, children's symbols, and materials from home.

Above all, it is important to make sure that the materials and toys **displayed in the classroom are bias- free**. Look with fresh eyes at your classroom and do a small test: observe whether materials, toys, and books in your room are biased. Do they contain discriminatory or biased presentations of children from minority groups?

### Mapping a group room. What do I have in my working room?

***Learning environment***

– *Are all children, their families, and employees represented in my room? Is every child represented in the room, as well as his/hers family, culture, and community?*
– *Do materials in my room help children understand the diversity that exists in the world? (For example, photos of people with different abilities, older people, younger people, people with different body shapes, skin colors, and so on.)*
– *Are all my students, and their families and communities, represented in positive way?*
– *Is it possible to guess, just by looking at the learning environment in my room, where my children come from and what are the characteristics of the community in which the kindergarten is operating?*
– *Is there balance between men and women doing different jobs and participating in different activities in a non-biased way in the materials and photos in my room?*

***Books***

– *Do I have books and reading materials in the classroom, which the children may have contributed from home, that are also written in their first language if it is different from the language spoken by the majority?*

– *Do I have different books or reading materials in the classroom that are age appropriate and represent different cultures and languages? Do I have any reading materials in the Romani language?*
– *Do I have pictures and reading materials that represent people and children of different abilities, learning styles, and problems? Do these materials represent them in stereotypical ways or in everyday situations so that children can build empathy for them, and can identify with them?*
– *What is the content of the books and stories I use in my work? What illustrations are in them? Who is doing what? Check the content of your stories. Who is portrayed as right and who is portrayed as wrong? Who is rich, and who is poor? Who has "respectable" jobs? Are Roma individuals represented in these stories? Are Roma individuals, and other members of minority groups, represented as the "bad guys?" Who has the power in these stories? Who are the heroes and heroines? Are standard negative stereotypes present? Look carefully at the words with negative connotations (for example, primitive, stupid, cheating, and so on). Think about how these kinds of stories can affect a child's self-esteem and self-concept?*

***Family center***

– *Do I have materials which represent different types of families (for example, single parents, extended families, and two-parent families)? Do I have materials which represent different lifestyles and different life conditions?*
– *Do I have materials and photos which represent typical gender roles (for example, women cooking and men repairing cars) or do they challenge these stereotypical gender roles?*
– *Do I have dolls which represent the children that I have in my group? Do I have any dolls which resemble a Roma child? Do I have dolls representing children of differing abilities? Do I have both male and female dolls?*

***Drama play center***

– *Do I provide children with different costumes, both traditional and contemporary, which represent all children in my group and their families' cultural backgrounds?*
– *Do I have photos and pictures of different scenes from life in the different groups that my children belong to? Are they stereotypical or accurate? (For example, Roma are usually presented sitting around the fire, with horses and wagons, which is not accurate at all.) Do I have materials and photos representing different cultures?*
– *Do I use different types of texts to inspire children to engage in dramatic a play?*

***Music and games***

– *Do I have CDs or tapes with music from different parts of the world, in different languages? Do I have music that represents what children and their parents like to listen at home? Do I have different types of*

*traditional music which represent the diversity that exists among the children in my group?*

*– Do I use traditional games in my work? Did I collect different traditional games from parents and families of children with whom I am working?*

***Art***

*– Do I have different types of materials for art work? Do I have colors that can represent the different skin, hair, and eye colors of the children in my group?*

*– Do I use different methods for artistic expression? Do I demonstrate to children how different cultures use art for expression?*

*– Do I use art to foster children's self-esteem and identity development?*

*– Do I want to make changes? What can I change? Why should I make changes?*

***You can also use this same check list to map your kindergarten.***

## 7. TEACHER'S PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To be able to implement quality pedagogy preschool teachers need high-quality **Professional Development,** meaning that they need opportunities to continually learn, reflect on their practice, and work cooperatively with other teachers who demonstrate an enjoyment of the process of lifelong learning and providing the best support for each child's development and growth. Preschool teachers need to regularly read professional journals and books, and to attend seminars and workshops that can really enrich their practice and skill sets, including those that may not directly pertain to their teaching practice, such as communication skills, management, classes on creative writing, and IT classes. Teachers need to incorporate and adapt what they learn at trainings, workshops, seminars, and conferences based on the conditions of their classroom.

Most early childhood education practitioners lack knowledge on how to work with diverse groups of children and parents. Children are becoming more and more diverse, but educators stay the same; they are mostly white and come from the dominant group. Recent research in the region has shown that pre-service teacher education does not provide a sufficient body of knowledge or skills, and does not develop the specific competences that are needed for work with children who come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Thus, preschool teachers need additional trainings that teach them to adapt to changing beliefs and attitudes towards differences, as well as how to use different pedagogical approaches. These trainings

are very challenging since they put professionals in a position where they question not only their practices but also deeply held personal values and beliefs. Trainings on Education for Social Justice[24] for adults and children, trainings on intercultural/multicultural education, and trainings on respect for diversity can be very useful. On the other hand, trainings in general, but especially in this field, have effects which require continuous support from peers and mentors. It is important to provide monitoring and mentoring to teachers, along with management and policy level support. Teachers and caregivers cannot be considered responsible for all inappropriate practices that may occur in kindergarten.

## *REFLECTION 7*

Here are some questions that are explored during the Education for Social Justice trainings. Try to answer the following:

*Can I …*

- Engage in non-discriminatory practices in my group, kindergarten, community, and society in general?
- Treat all children with respect regardless of their background?
- Treat all families and community members with respect, regardless of their background?
- Openly share my feelings and experiences about bias and discrimination?
- Openly name all the unacceptable practices towards some children and their families in my kindergarten and act to change those practices?
- Explore the influence of my own culture and dominant attitudes on my practice?
- Approach children and families in a non-biased, empathetic way?
- Question my biases and stereotypes, and whether some of my practices may be discriminatory?
- Openly talk with children about stereotypes and prejudices and how they affect the lives of some of their peers?
- Start to question my own attitudes and beliefs?

[24] In the ISSA network this kind of training is very well developed.

To improve their practice, preschool teachers need to learn to **reflect, assess, seek feedback on**, **and evaluate** the quality of their pedagogical practice and level of professional teaching competences, and then make appropriate changes when necessary. To achieve that purpose they need to use different instruments for **self-evaluation**. Self-evaluation results can be used by preschool teachers as a base for creating a professional development plan. Preschool teachers can ask also children and parents for feedback and then make changes in their plans, learning environment, and teaching approach based on these comments.

Collecting feedback from children is the best way to develop a democratic environment in your group. Ask children to share their opinion to demonstrate that you respect their ideas, and that you are open to their suggestions and want to learn about how they feel and what they would like in kindergarten. Are they happy with what you are doing? What do they like and what would they like to change? Use evaluation tools at the end of the day to collect their opinions. When you hear what they say, express your feelings and ideas. Start the following day by reflecting on their answers. A simple technique is to ask your students the following questions in the closing circle at the end of the day:

– What did you like?
– What have you learned?
– Are you content with the work you did? Could you have done more?
– Are you content with my work? What I could do differently?

Sometimes you can also use a simple graphic presentation with smiles, for example, and ask children to say how they felt during the day:

Children can also draw how they feel; you can make a paper strip for each child and put in the room. On the top of the each strip write the child's name and divide all the strips into parts, with one section for each day of the week. Help your students to answer honestly. Tell children that at the end of the day they will draw a picture of how the day was for them. Find time to talk with each child individually about their drawings.

Always start the next day with an appreciation of their honesty and feedback, and explain to the children how you plan to incorporate their ideas in your future planning and work.

One of the best professional development tools is the **Teacher's portfolio**.[25] The word *portfolio* comes from old Latin words *port* which means move, and *folio* which means papers. So, a preschool teacher's portfolio is a "mobile collection" of documents showing their work and can be organized in a physical folder or in digital format on the computer.

## *REFLECTION 8*

Imagine that you have an empty box in front of you and your task is to fill it with documents that will demonstrate what kind of educator you were to future generations. What would you put in the box? How would you organize the content of the box? How would you like people to use it?

A teacher's portfolio is a structured collection of "proof" of the preschool teacher's work which illustrates his or her talents, skills, knowledge, and ideas. It is not solely a documentation of the preschool teacher's work; rather it is also a compilation of their reflections, attitudes, beliefs, descriptions of the challenges they faced and how they overcame[26] them; video and audio recordings; sketches of activity plans and projects; and so on. It is important that a portfolio contain certificates, recommendation letters, articles from newspapers, and their diploma as well. All artifacts placed in the portfolio are selected by the author so they best represent him or her.

A teacher's portfolio can be used in many different ways: for sharing experiences with colleagues, for self-assessment, and for the external assessment of a preschool teacher's work by associated experts, principals, and other education professionals. Sharing with colleagues is a very inspiring way to use your portfolio. Practice has shown that preschool teachers immediately start to write down ideas while reading their peers' portfolios. Preschool teachers also gain new insights and ideas when reading comments on their portfolio from their colleagues. Peer learning is a very effective method for practitioners' professional improvement when working in supportive and collaborative environments.

Sometimes preschool teachers share their portfolios with parents, families and community members to demonstrate the components of high-quality pedagogy and what they do for, and with, children in school, while also promoting their profession.

The process of self-reflection when compiling a portfolio is a very powerful tool for professional growth. By selecting artifacts and creating written reflections as to why you choose those artifacts, preschool teachers gain a deeper understanding of their own work and how their work affects the children with whom they are working.

[25] Adapted from the text written by Sanja Brajković, Open Academy Step by Step, and Vesna Marjanović, primary school Samobor, Croatia.
[26] Peter Doolittle (1994) Teacher portfolio assessment, Practical *Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 4 (1). Retrieved March 28, 2011. Available from: http://PAREonline.net/getvn.asp?v=4&n=1

### Create your own professional portfolio in four steps

**Step 1: Planning** – Write two pages about yourself, who you are, where you come from, what your role as a teacher means to you, and what you want to achieve for yourself and the children and families with whom you are working. Your answers will help you decide what kind of structure your portfolio should have, how many chapters it should have, and what those chapters will be about. Organize your portfolio in a way that illustrates your work in all relevant aspects of your practice. You may want to use the focus areas outlined in *Competent Teachers of the 21st Century: Principles of Quality Pedagogy* to organize your portfolio. Looking at things you do in each of these focus areas will give you a comprehensive idea of your strengths and areas for improvement.

**Step 2: Collecting documentation** – collect three types of documentation: data from the classroom (examples of the children's work, photos, audio and visual recordings, and so on); reflections (examples of plans and reflections on what worked well, what could have been done better, children's reactions, personal reactions, questions, dilemmas, and so on) and others' reactions to your work (letters from parents, children's work that they made for you, evaluations of your work, assessments from community members, peers, associated experts, counselors, or inspectors.). Do not collect documentation of past work; focus on what is currently happening. You should take a big box and put in it everything that represents your work.

**Step 3: Selection** – Choose documentation which illustrates your practice in the best possible way. Think very carefully what you are going to choose.

**Step 4: Refection** – Look what you have chosen and think carefully about why you chose it and how it illustrates your practice. This is the most important part of the process of creating a portfolio.

The professional portfolio is never finished since you will continually fill it with new materials. As you do so, you can observe how your practice grows and develops and how that process directly benefits the children and families with whom you work.

ISSA created a tool (**Continuum for Assessing Caregivers in Community/Home-based Learning Environments**) within **A Good Start** for assessing quality inclusive practices in diverse settings, such as kindergartens and home- or community-based services, to support teachers' reflections on their practice (see Annex 1 and 2). This tool is based on a more comprehensive ISSA professional development tool with a four-scale continuum of practices (ISSA Professional Development Tool for Kindergarten Teachers), which illustrates the core characteristics of the teaching profession:

- It is very complex and requires a lot of problem solving and critical thinking skills, especially in areas of analysis and synthesis (finding elements which are important and integrating and combining them to create conditions in which each child can develop and "blossom."
- It is very creative, even when goals and outcomes are defined by national documents, preschool teachers have the freedom to decide how they are going to reach them.
- It is never finished and it is a life-long learning process, a journey towards high-quality practice that always has room for additional improvements; this is why the continuum has four levels, including inappropriate practice, good start, quality practice, and moving forward. It is not an individual activity; it requires collaboration in a respectful way with other people (children, parents, colleagues, communities, other experts).
- It is of a high responsibility since the way how work is done with young children can affect their future lives a lot.
- It is very powerful because it can create new generations with new, better values.
- Its importance is underestimated in broader society.

Self-assessment is very important for preschool teachers who want to work on their professional development. It gives them the opportunity to critically reflect on their practice and think about what they can do to improve their practice. ISSA's Professional Development Tool can support teachers in this process by helping them to conceptualize ideas connected with quality practice that are usually vague. It can also help teachers communicate with their colleagues on a concrete level about the actions that preschool teacher wants to undertake.

The *Continuum for Assessing Caregivers in Community/Home-based Learning Environments* can also be used as a self-assessment tool for teachers working in multicultural environments that promote the values, beliefs, and practices of a child-centered pedagogy as well as the principles of democracy in educational settings. This tool can enhance their professional development by providing examples of quality practices in the areas where teachers gave themselves lower scores on their self-assessment.

# CHAPTER 4: CHILD'S PORTFOLIO

In the early childhood period, it may be difficult to monitor and communicate a child's subtle growth in learning and development because much of their learning is through play. Thus, one of the best ways to document a child's progress in learning and development in kindergarten is through a child's portfolio.

The question of assessment is always challenging in early childhood in terms of what is developmentally appropriate. Young children should be tested the same way older children or adults are tested on acquisition of knowledge. Traditional ways of assessing a child's progress are less and less acceptable (summative assessment) and educators are talking more and more about *authentic assessment* and *formative assessment*.

The differences in these approaches to assessment are presented in the following table:[27]

[27] D. G. Wren (2008.): *Using Formative Assessment to Increase Learning*. Research Brief, 1,6.

| Characteristics | FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT | SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT |
|---|---|---|
| Purpose | Improvement of the learning process; gives information on what the child has learned during the learning process | Measurement of what, and to what extent, a topic was learned |
| Child's Participation | Enhanced | Inhibited |
| Child's Motivation | Intrinsic; oriented around the process of learning and gaining new knowledge and skills | Extrinsic; focuses on what has been learned |
| Role of the Preschool Teacher | Gives the child constructive feedback and adjusts the teaching process to the child's needs, interests and capacities | Measures the child's level of achievement |
| Assessment Techniques | Non-formal and formal | Formal |
| Effects on Learning and Development | Positive and long-lasting | Short-lasting |

One of the best methods of formative assessment is to assemble and review a portfolio of the child's work.

## 1. WHAT IS A CHILD'S PORTFOLIO?

The portfolio is a record of the child's learning process and development: what the child has learned and how they have gone about learning and development; what they think about and how they think; their questions, analyses, syntheses, products, and creations; how they feel about themselves and how they interact intellectually, emotionally, and socially with others. In other words, a child's portfolio is a purposeful collection of the child's work that reveals, to the child and others, their efforts and achievements in one or more areas of development.

Within A Good Start, ISSA introduced a tool called *ISSA Child Assessment Instrument (ages three to six*) to help caregivers in developing children's portfolios by structuring their observations and recordings of a child's behavior. This tool includes child development indicators in five developmental domains, which guide adults in observing a child's development (See Annex 3). By using this tool, caregivers may collect various data related to a child's performance and progressively indicate their development in different areas.

## 2. WHAT ARE THE PURPOSES OF A PORTFOLIO?

The main purposes of a child's portfolio are:

– to keep track of individual children's progress,
– to provide a basis for evaluating the quality of individual children's overall performance,
– to make sense of children's work,
– to present a child's work, achievements, feelings, and needs to their parents,
– to motivate children to learn,
– to encourage children to take responsibility for their own learning and development by participation in the assessment of their work,
– to promote learning through reflection and self-assessment.

## 3. HOW TO DO I CREATE A PORTFOLIO? WHAT SHOULD I PUT IN IT?

The portfolio should include work samples, records of various forms of systematic observation, and screening tests, as well as everything that demonstrates accountability and recognizes and encourages the individual progress of a child. Portfolios are focused on the *child's progress and success,* not *their failure*. Many effective portfolios also contain a reflective element, where the child has contemplated about their own strengths and weaknesses as a learner in one way or another.

Decisions about what items to place in a portfolio should be based on the purposes of the portfolio. Without a purpose, a portfolio is simply a folder of the child's work. Preschool teachers often start to develop a child's portfolio without a clear idea of its purpose, which results in the mere accumulation of all the child's products. This is **not** a portfolio. But if you have these types of materials available, then you can easily start to transform them into portfolios.

**How do I transform a collection of a child's work into a portfolio?**

**Depending on child's age, complete the following steps either with the child or by yourself:**

- Take all the child's work and put it in order from the best examples of the child's work to those that children do not like at all.
- Ask the child to pick the two that they like the most. On a separate paper record why the child thinks that these are their best work, how the child thinks they were able to produce these works, what kinds of problems they faced during the process, and how they managed to overcome them.
- On a separate piece of paper write down what the child thinks is the biggest difference between their best and their worst work. Also record what the child wants to achieve in the future.
- Ask child to make a cover page for their portfolio by making a drawing, if they can, writing their name or making their symbol.

(Ideas from the work of Sanja Brajkovic, Open Academy Step by Step Croatia)

The materials in a portfolio should be organized by **category and chronological order**. The five key areas of a child's development, which are included in the *ISSA Child's Assessment Instrument*, are usually part of a child's portfolio. These key areas include: physical and motor skill development; social and emotional development; logical and mathematical development; language, communication, and literacy development; and the development of critical and creative thinking skills. Although preschool age children usually cannot read, write, or calculate (in a primary school manner), the development of pre-literacy and pre-math skills should be closely monitored since they are the building blocks for various interconnected skills from an early age, and they are important prerequisites for later educational success.

Arranging the child's work samples, checklist, inventories, screening test results, and other information should be simple as all the information in the portfolio is labeled and dated. Many preschool teachers use a three-ring binder for each child. Teachers use dividers and folders inside the binder to separate the portfolio into the different developmental sections. Stamps, stickers, and decorative hole punches can help to identify areas of progress following a letter and number identification system, while a more traditional assessment page can mark progress in other areas throughout the year. Generally, teachers update these assessment pages three to four times a year to show the child's achievements and to be able to discuss them during parent-teacher meetings. At the end of the school year, assessment portfolios may go home with the child, stay with preschool teacher, or follow the child if the child is transferring to another age group in kindergarten, or to primary school, in which case the portfolio will serve as a preview of the child's abilities and achievements.

Documentation for the child's portfolio usually comes from the preschool teacher's *systemic observations* of a child in different situations – such as playing alone, playing in small groups, playing in large groups – at various times of day and in various circumstances. Systematic observation must be objective, selective, and carefully recorded, and should be based on regular activities, not on specially designed activities.

These forms of observations should be included in the portfolio:

– ***Anecdotal records*** are most useful for spontaneous events and represent neutral, nonjudgmental notes of a child's activity. Anecdotal records should be cumulative and reveal insights about the child's progress when they are reviewed sequentially.

**Example for recording Anecdotal Comments day by day**

| Name |
|---|
| **Monday** |
| **Tuesday** |
| **Wednesday** |
| **Thursday** |
| **Friday** |

**Example of Anecdotal Record Chart for Activity Centers**

| Anecdotal Records | | |
|---|---|---|
| Group: | | |
| Date: | | |
| **Name** | Name | **Name** |
| | | |
| | | |
| **Name** | Name | **Name** |

– ***Checklists or inventories*** are usually based on instructional objectives and the development associated with the acquisition of the skills being monitored.

### Sample of estimation of participation in cooperative learning activity

Child's name:

Time and date:

| **What did we do?** | **Yes** | **No** |
|---|---|---|
| Did I listen to others? | | |
| Did I stay in my place? | | |
| Did I share with others? | | |
| Did I wait for my turn? | | |

What can I do better next time?_____

– ***Rating scales*** are used in situations where a child's more complex behaviors are observed and when the behavior has several aspects or components.

### Sample of rating scale for pre-reading

Child's name:

Activity:

Date:

| | Very much | Sometimes | Yes/No | Rarely | Never | I do not know |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| – I like when somebody reads to me. | | | | | | |
| – I like to look at books and picture books. | | | | | | |
| – Listening to reading makes me feel happy. | | | | | | |
| – I like to look at books and comic books. | | | | | | |
| – I like to make books with my friends and kindergarten teacher. | | | | | | |
| – I like to read books with my parents at home. | | | | | | |

**Sample of rating scale for pre-reading**

– **Open-ended questions** represent the most effective and easiest method for gathering information. Asking children open-ended questions about their work (for example: *Can you tell me how you decided to create this drawing and use these colors and shapes*?) helps preschool teachers understand how children think and why they behave as they do.
– **Screening tests** are sometimes used to gather information that will help preschool teachers understand and learn about the developmental level of a child, and his/her learning and developmental needs so that the preschool teacher can plan meaningful learning experiences for a child. Results of screening tests should never be used alone, and should never be exploited for labeling and excluding children.
– **These materials** can also be part of a child's portfolio: surveys with the child and/or their parents; self-assessments; drawings; the child's favorite picture books or picture book they have made with their peers; taped or transcribed conversations with the child; photos of the projects the child has completed either individually or in groups; newspaper clippings; and everything else that teachers, parents, and children may need to monitor the child's progress and assess their learning and development.

## 4. CHILDREN'S REFLECTION IN THEIR PORTFOLIO

Portfolios are usually divided into two groups: ***process-oriented*** and ***product-oriented*** portfolios.

**Process-oriented portfolios** focus on the growth of a learner. They document the processes of learning and creating and include earlier drafts of projects, reflections on the creation process, and obstacles encountered along the way. Older children will be better able to reflect on the learning process, but this does not mean that younger children cannot reflect on the learning process as well. Portfolios also help children learn how to identify when their skills and knowledge grow, and they give children an opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments and establish goals for what they would like to work on next.

In these portfolios, children should consider their best work. The aim is to document and reflect on the quality and range of the child's accomplishments. These portfolios are very important for preschool teachers because they demonstrate how the child's evaluation criteria may differ from the teacher's. It is crucial that children justify their choices and reflect on them as you develop these portfolios. Preschool teachers can write down the child's reflections for them.

## 5. HOW TO USE A CHILD'S PORTFOLIO FOR ASSESSMENT

As previously mentioned, a portfolio can be used by preschool teachers to assess a child's progress and the places where s/he requires improvement and a portfolio can be used by children for self-assessment. No matter what assessment is in question there are **three basic rules** which should not be broken:

- **Portfolios build on children's capacities and strengths**; by their nature they are contrary to a deficit model of assessment/evaluation (explained earlier in the text).
- **Appropriate assessment always compares the child's current work to their earlier work**. This evaluation should indicate the child's progress toward a standard of performance that is consistent with the teacher's curriculum and appropriate developmental expectations.
- **Portfolios are not meant to be used for comparing children to each other**. They are used to document individual children's progress over time.

The teacher's conclusions about a child's achievements, abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and needs should be based on the full range of that child's development, as documented by the data in the portfolio, and on the teacher's knowledge of the curriculum and the stages of children's development.

An appropriate assessment of young children should involve the children themselves, parents, and teachers. The portfolio method promotes a shared approach to making the decisions that will affect children's attitudes toward work and education in general.

Experience from A Good Start showed that portfolios are an amazingly powerful tool when assessing the achievements of disadvantaged Roma children. Usually vulnerable Roma children are compared with other children in a way that does not take into account the different starting positions of children, since some Roma children come from poor homes and deprived learning environments due to a high level of poverty. These children may have limited access to books, toys, and learning materials. They may not have adequate clothing or food and often do not speak the language of instruction. Some children are at a further disadvantage when preschool teachers use a deficit model of assessment and focus only on what children do not know, thus neglecting much of the skills and knowledge that these children may have. Using a portfolio for assessment makes children feel very proud of their own progress, they feel empowered, and their self-esteem improves.

That is why part of the training process within the AGS project (Bratislava international workshop, 2011) was focused on developing and using a portfolio for children. Participants in the training had the opportunity to present their portfolios to each other, and to discuss how their portfolios can be improved and used in many different ways, with a particular focus on using them to increase children's self-esteem and encouragment from parents.

## 6. HOW TO USE A CHILD'S PORTFOLIO WHEN WORKING WITH PARENTS

Every day families have many questions for their children such as, "What did you do today in kindergarten?" or "Did you learn something new today?" They also have questions for their child's teachers, such as, "How is my child progressing?" or "Does my child have friends at school?" or "Do they participate in activities?" These are very important questions but, in a way, the answers can be much more important. If they are given in a superficial way ("Oh, everything was great!"), parents may think that the teachers do not care about their child, or that they do not know enough to provide the answer. If they are in the form of positive labels ("Oh, he's so clever") or negative labels ("She didn't want to do anything, I don't know what to do with her!") consequences may be even worse: parents may never learn about their children's experiences at school; they may feel hurt and will not attend the kindergarten at all; they may begin to develop low expectations for their children; they may shout at their child and the child may develop negative feelings about kindergarten and their teacher; or parents may stop asking questions all together.

As discussed earlier, parents want to know about their children's education and how they may participate in it. Usually parents have very limited opportunities to participate in their children's education. One of the best ways to display the child's learning and development for parents is through the Child's Portfolio! With the portfolio as a basis for discussion, the teacher and parent can review concrete examples of the child's work, rather than trying to discuss the child's progress in the abstract. In that way the child's portfolio becomes the meeting point for a dialogue about child and what is in their best interest.

When parents have opportunities to look at a child's portfolio and reflect on it, they will:

- gain a better understanding of the work conducted in the kindergarten;
- start to trust the preschool teacher's intentions and competences and create a partnership with them;
- obtain solid evidence of their child's capacities, and educational and development needs;
- receive ideas about how to support their children in the learning process and development in the home.

## 7. WHO CAN PRESENT THE PORTFOLIO TO PARENTS?

The child's portfolio may be presented to parents by preschool teachers during individual conversations or by their child. With older preschool children, preschool teachers can organize parents' meetings where the child presents their own portfolio. These are not group meetings, but individual meetings with the child, their parents, and their teacher. These meetings are called child-led conferences and are the best way to empower children to take responsibility for their learning process. These meetings should be well prepared and children need to pick out the items they want to present most. At the beginning of the school year, these meetings should be facilitated by the preschool teacher (first the child presents, then parents react, and the preschool teacher provides her

comments). Later in the school year, children and parents may have this kind of meeting without the preschool teacher's presence. This is a great way to model constructive discussions between parents and children.

From time to time, when parents are unable to come to kindergarten for one reason or another, preschool teachers may ask children to take their portfolios home and share them with their parents and family members. In this case, preschool teachers can send a message to the parents in advance to prepare them.

**Sample letter to accompany a child's portfolio**

*Date:*
*Dear parents (add parents' names),*

*(child's name) will bring home his/her portfolio for you to look at together. This portfolio is a very precious documentation of (child's name) learning and development. We kindly ask you to look at it together with him/her, ask him/her questions, and make comments. We are very eager to hear your feedback on (child's name) progress. The portfolio is an integral part of our pedagogy in kindergarten so we ask that you to send it back at the end of the week. Thank you for your cooperation.*

*Respectfully yours,*
*(preschool teacher signature)*

Using portfolios with disadvantaged Roma parents is a very good strategy because it allows them to:

- feel proud of their child's progress;
- become confident that the preschool teachers care about their child's well-being, and that they have set high expectations for their child;
- better understand what is happening in kindergarten, what their child is doing, and how they learn;
- better understand why it's important for children to attend kindergarten;
- feel respected because they are asked for their opinion, suggestions, and input;
- feel empowered to participate in their child's education.

# CHAPTER 5: THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE – LOSING CONTACT WITH ROMA CHILDREN AND FAMILIES[28]

## WHAT THE PRESCHOOL TEACHER CAN DO TO PREVENT IT

1. **Rules, routines, and learning environment, in general**
   Mainstream education contrasts considerably with traditional Roma culture and the way in which these children learn in their families and communities: the closed classroom environment; the requirement of daily attendance; the presence of unfamiliar children; and learning from a teacher who is not a family member. An additional problem is that in most mainstream classrooms, children rarely have an opportunity to choose their activities, how much time they spend on these activities, or to determine who they will complete these activities with. In traditional school settings children are expected to remain seated in a closed environment where there are strict rules about orderly behavior, attentiveness, and discussion.
2. **Purpose, relevance, and value of education** – For many marginalized Roma children, mainstream education lacks relevance and value. Educational activities such as hypothetical problem solving and theorizing do not seem to result in any concrete, tangible outcomes for some Roma children.
3. **Over-presentation and overestimation of written language, reading, and writing** – almost all communication is based on written language.
4. **Neglecting and underestimating the effects of poverty** – Poverty is often equated with "stupidity," and poor children are often not given the extra attention they need to overcome frequent barriers to their education, including a lack of financial aid, inadequate nutrition, insufficient materials for school work, and inadequate healthcare.
5. **Prejudices and discrimination** – Some preschool teachers' attitudes toward Roma children are very biased and they think that Roma children are incompetent, inferior, insignificant, and incapable of learning, so they either ignore these children, lower their expectations for them, or harass them. They treat their families in the same

[28] Tracy Smith (1997) Recognizing Difference: The Romani "GYPSY" Child Socialization and Education Process, *Romani Association of Australia, Prospect East, Australia Source: British Journal of Sociology of Education, June 1997, Vol. 18 Issue 2, pg. 243.*

manner; they believe that their families are incompetent and that their parents do not care for their children or their children's education. Thus, teachers lower expectations of these parents, ignore them, or harass them.

6. **Monocultural characteristics of education institutions** – While participating in their community's day-to-day activities Roma children learn about their culture, history, political, social, and economic life. In many educational institutions, Roma children will likely only learn about the mainstream culture and its history and politics.

In the following table we emphasize some of the Roma cultural patterns that affect a child's education and socialization. We also reference children's experiences and how preschool teachers can improve their method of working with children.

## AFFIRMATION OF ROMA FAMILY CULTURE[29]

***Always keep in mind that not all Roma children are the same and that there are many individual differences among Roma children, including cultural, gender, and social differences!***

| Cultural patterns | Child's experience | What educators should do |
|---|---|---|
| Clear societal organization; family clan; all members of an extended family live together in the same house, street, or neighborhood | The child is used to an exciting life with a lot of activities at home. Someone is frequently coming or leaving and the child often sleeps at someone else's home. | The child may be very bored in kindergarten because they miss participating in diverse activities that quickly switch to another task. Teachers should provide the child with opportunities to freely wander through the classroom or go to other spaces in the kindergarten. Organize activities where the child can make free choices, as well as activities that support sharing and cooperation. Organize activities which do not last long, which switch quickly, and which can be done in pairs and small groups. Slowly increase the amount of time spent on each activity and introduce individual work. |

[29] This table was made based on data presented in the article, *Recognizing Difference: The Romani "GYPSY" Child Socialization and Education Process*, Tracy Smith, Romani Association of Australia, Prospect East, Australia. *Source: British Journal of Sociology of Education, June 1997, Vol. 18 Issue 2, p. 243*,and on an idea presented in the book *Roots and Wings, Stacy York.*

| Cultural patterns | Child's experience | What educators should do |
|---|---|---|
| More than one generation lives together | The child participates in almost all family activities. They are used to a high level of cooperation and responsibility. The child's separation from their family when they begin to attend kindergarten is often seen as an endangerment to family cohesion. | The child may try to take care of younger children or try to find other family members in the kindergarten so they can care for their younger siblings. Mixed age groups are ideal for these children, because they gives them the opportunity to stay together with their siblings and family members. If you do not have these groups, give children the opportunity to visit their siblings during the day. Give children and family members opportunities to slowly adjust to kindergarten. Invite family members to visit and see what is happening in kindergarten. Respectfully understand if families do not want to participate in activities you have organized in the kindergarten. Visit the children's families. Show them that there is no competition between you and the family and that you want to cooperate in the best interest of the child. |
| Much of a child's education is achieved in the family and community. Children participate in the community's day-to-day activities where they learn by watching, listening, and observing the economic, social, linguistic, political and moral codes of their society. They often learn to understand and read the verbal and non-verbal communication signals of the adults in their community at a much earlier age than their non-Roma counterparts. | Children are used to learning from others in a non-formal way. Sometimes they may simply observe before they try to do something new. They may have to see an activity performed, and the try it, in order to learn. | Organize a lot of practical, hands-on activities; allow children time to watch and listen before you ask them to react or try something on their own. Give them time to think.<br><br>Be aware that children are very sensitive to non-verbal signals; be aware of your non-verbal communication and try to emphasize what you say with the appropriate signals. |

| Cultural patterns | Child's experience | What educators should do |
|---|---|---|
| Many disadvantaged Roma parents do not see mainstream education as practical, essential, or necessary for their children; instead they believe that it is a tool to control their lives and their children's lives. Some Roma people strongly believe that they have the right to determine the course and direction of their children's education, and that those educational decisions should not be forced upon them by an outside authority. | Children have mixed feelings about mainstream education and are torn between family and community and their educational institution. | It is very important for parents to understand that a formal education is critical, useful, and meaningful for their children. Invite them to participate in their children's learning process in kindergarten; ask for their opinion and allow them to make some decisions about their children's education. They need to be certain that they are in charge of their children even when they attend kindergarten. Do not use parent's meetings to tell parents the mistakes they may have made in raising their children or to tell parents that you are going to teach them how to improve their child-rearing skills. |
| One family member (usually the father) often has power to make decisions and represents the family authority. In general, elders are to be respected, and their opinions and advice should be taken in account. | Children are taught to respect authority. | The child will likely give up their choices if an adult does not approve of them. Until the child starts to feel comfortable in the kindergarten and with the educators, they will avoid confrontation and openly saying their opinion or making choices of which their teachers do not approve. Show the child that their choices and decisions are respected. Show an interest in what the child thinks the authority in their community would do to solve a problem. Tell the child if you agree with their idea. If you do not agree with their idea, you should tell that child some people have different opinion and that is perfectly fine. If the child has any problems, you can always ask the elderly people in their community for support. |

| Cultural patterns | Child's experience | What educators should do |
|---|---|---|
| Family members teach children to respect other adults, themselves, and their group by including them in the day-to-day activities of their community. | Children are used to contributing to the community as active members who have their own share of responsibilities. They are not treated as children who require care and instruction, rather they are treated as active subjects.<br><br>Children are used to actively learning while moving and doing.<br><br>Children are used to doing "real" things | Let children choose tasks and responsibilities for themselves, such as serving meals, taking care of plants, animals, and materials in the room, monitoring the time schedule, and so on. Let them help you with some work. Create situations where they feel that they are contributing to the general well-being of the group.<br><br>Let them choose how they will complete their tasks. |
| Parents and family members may have had negative experiences with discrimination, abuse, violence, the police, health care services, and welfare protection institutions. Many Roma have experienced discrimination within the education system and have had their rights to learn and to progress denied. | The child may often be exposed to mockery and teasing, which requires them to be tough to survive in the hostile outside world. Frequently the child is taught to fear non-Roma people, to tolerate injustice, and not to trust or expect much from non-Roma people. | The child needs to feel respected and safe, so react immediately to any kind of discriminatory behavior that is directed toward them. |
| Strong family and community ties | The child may believe that the family is more important than individual; family members are often expected to give up their personal dreams and wishes for the sake of the family. | React strongly and immediately if the child does not come to kindergarten because they have to care for a family member or they have to participate in family work. Intervene if the child always gives up their toys to the other children in the group |

| Cultural patterns | Child's experience | What educators should do |
|---|---|---|
| Young children are always in the company of community members and they are frequently carried, held, and showered with physical affection. Family and community members share the responsibility of carrying the child and, as a result, they are usually people centered. Feelings are often expressed through physical affection. Family and the extended kinship network provide children with a sense of security, permanency, and confidence. These things are particularly important for children who move frequently. | The child is used to being touched and to expressing their feelings and emotions through physical contact. The person with whom the child is completing an activity may be more important than the activity itself. A feeling of belonging and of being a part of the community is of great importance to the child, and they need to feel accepted to be able to learn and develop. | Do not be surprised if the child wants to kiss you, hug you, or simply touch you. If you can, hold the child from time to time and use every opportunity to touch the child while walking through the group or when you want to get the child's attention. Organize games and activities where the children have physical contact with each other. Organize more small group activities rather than large group activities and give the child the opportunity to choose with whom they play. It is very important to lower yourself to the child's level and engage in eye contact. |
| Independence is one of the values that parents and communities want their children to learn. Children are encouraged to be independent from an early age. This prepares them for the social and economic responsibilities of adolescence when they are often expected to marry, work full-time, and raise a family of their own. Independent behavior is reinforced by encouraging children to find and prepare their own food, dress themselves, put themselves to sleep without supervision, and care for their younger siblings. A child's sense of autonomy is further reinforced by a lack of physical punishment . | The child is used to taking care of themselves and deciding when they to go to sleep, when they eat, what they eat, and what clothes they will wear. The child may not be used to time schedules or routines. | Provide the child with choices and focus on their personal rhythm rather focusing on routines and time schedules. Invite the children to make their own time schedule, and then insist that they stick to it. If the child complains, remind them that they made the schedule and now they have to respect it. |

| Cultural patterns | Child's experience | What educators should do |
|---|---|---|
| The honor, pride, and dignity of every individual, and the whole community, is very important | The child maintains their family's and community's dignity and honor through their behavior. | Talk with parents about the child successes and always introduce the projection into the future. Tell parents that their child's behavior honors their family and community. Carefully consider how you will tell parents that their child needs to alter their behavior. Talk to their parents privately and do not talk about their child in front of others. Be sensitive to parents' desire to preserve their honor and dignity. Do not excessively praise the child if you do not have concrete proofs to show to parents, They will know they are not telling the truth and feel humiliated. |
| Humor, jokes, and acting are all highly appreciated talents | The child is used to expressing themselves verbally and non-verbally: the child is appreciated for their humor, comments, and imitations | Provide the child with opportunities to play with words during group work and to express themselves creatively. Use drama activities, singing, dancing, and funny games. Praise the child's humor. |
| The Roma community has a strong oral tradition and knowledge is verbally transmitted. Oral tradition is typically associated with elderly community members and their since they remember the traditional customs and stories, and they have gained insight and intelligence through their life experiences. | Children are used to listening to and telling stories from an early age. They may be more likely to believe information that is transmitted orally than written information. | Recognize teachable moments and tell stories that are connected to the topic you are teaching. Use storytelling to motivate child to learn or to moderate their behavior. Ask the child to share a story with their friends. |

| Cultural patterns | Child's experience | What educators should do |
|---|---|---|
| There is a focus on the child's acquisition of concrete, work-related skills due to the important contribution children are expected to make to their family's economic activities. Roma children often accompany family members on jobs like flower selling or scrap metal collecting. | Roma children "do not know how to play" and easily give up on games easily because they are encouraged to contribute to the real-life economic activities of the community and make that goal their priority. Playing, by comparison, seems to lack purpose and value. When children encounter abstract concepts that they are not used to while playing, it makes them feel uneasy and they often lose interest. | Explain to the child how they can contribute to their families, and the kinds of benefits they can provide, if they finish their schooling.<br><br>Allow the child to play games that remind them of real work or life situations. Give the child opportunities to work in the preschool yard or in the kitchen. Talk with the child about what they can learn while playing, and how they can use the games that they have learned in preschool when they go home and teach their siblings how to play these games.<br><br>When introducing abstract concepts, try to connect them to real life situations. |
| Some Roma families view the stages from infancy, to childhood, to maturity, with relatively little anxiety. There are no timetables for crawling, talking, walking, and so on. Families are still interested in their children's development, however. The acquisition of baby talk, for instance, is often greeted with interest and delight. | Children are not used to parents' expectations. Their development is not compared with that of other children their age. | Share the child's new skills and knowledge with parents. Invite parents and children to set learning goals for the child together. |

## *REFLECTION 9*

Carefully look at the table above and think about the children you have in your group. Do these suggestions give you any ideas on how to improve your everyday practice? Might you consider developing a similar table for the children in your group who come from other groups and/or different families? Are the Roma people really so unique?

# CHAPTER 6: MORE QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE ANSWERED – WHAT ELSE DO WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT?

## 1. HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE WITH HARD-TO-REACH FAMILIES AND CHILDREN AND HOW DO WE MOTIVATE THEM TO ENROLL IN KINDERGARTEN?

We often need to ask ourselves the following question: "Does our influence on our students' well-being stop when they leave our classroom? Are we only supposed to work with the children who are officially enrolled in our kindergartens, or are there other possibilities as well?"

The majority of children who are enrolled in kindergartens belong to middle-class families (children who are already more or less doing fine developmentally). The children who greatly need high-quality early childhood programs (children of Roma origin, children from rural areas, children whose families belong to a disadvantaged group, and children whose families belong to a low socio-economic level) usually do not receive this advantage. While the reasons for this discrepancy vary, it is often the result of limited space capacities in existing kindergartens. But kindergartens can always think outside the box and try to reach all the children in their communities!

## *REFLECTION 10*

### Development of an outreach work model[30]

When thinking about how to reach Roma children, and other children who are not involved in preschool education, you should follow these steps and ask these questions:

1. **Who in the local community is currently excluded from the services we offer for children in their early years?** Why are our services hard to reach for these families and their young children? How can we begin to reach out to those who are excluded?
2. **How can we ensure the quality of the services that are provided?** How can we make sure that children experience high-quality provisions and that the child and their family benefit from the service?
3. **What specialized understanding do we need?** Is there anything we should understand or be aware of as we develop ways to be inclusive?
4. **What partnerships are available to us?** Is there anyone in the community, or any other **local** organization, with whom we can work?
5. **What professional understanding do we need?** Do we need any further professional knowledge to support our outreach work?
6. **How will we organize our outreach work?** Who will undertake the outreach work?
7. **What resources, tools, policies, and guidance do we need to support the work?**
8. **How will we monitor the quality and outcomes of our outreach work?**
9. **How will we share our work and encourage other services to develop their practices in an effort to reach all children in the community?**

### Ada, Serbia: Preschool teachers reaching out to Roma community[31]

The Roma community in Ada is removed from mainstream society. This case is different, however, because things are changing for the better in Ada.

What is going on there? Preschool teachers from the "mainstream" preschool went out to the Roma settlement and, together with Roma parents and leaders, performed a puppet show.

[30] Adapted from Save the Children UK (2007) *Early Years Outreach Practice*, http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/early-years-outreach-practice

[31] Example is taken from the publication: *Begin at the beginning, Beginning is Important – Parents, Professionals and Local Community – Joint Actions for the Benefit of Young Children* (2010) CIP-Center for Interactive Pedagogy, Belgrade.

Of course, there were significant negotiations and discussions involving all community stakeholders that preceded this performance, but the show itself was not earth-shaking.

The results, on the other hand, were very dramatic:
– the number of Roma children attending the "mainstream" preschool increased;
– Roma parents and Roma leaders began to understand the importance of early childhood education (ECD);
– "Mainstream" preschool teachers have a better understanding of the conditions in which Roma children and their families live;
– Alternative ways of working with marginalized boys and girls were developed.

*The main lesson learned here, or rather demonstrated here, is that the formal ECD system ("mainstream" preschool) can initiate informal ECD (puppet theater) activities, which, in turn, strengthen the formal system (more Roma children attending "mainstream" preschool), setting a positive series of events in motion.*

## 2. HOW DO WE PROVIDE SUPPORT TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN TIMES OF TRANSITION?

Times of transition are very important periods in the lives of every child and their families. They are key events and/or processes that occur at specific periods or turning points in life.[32] There are different definitions and explanations of transitions in contemporary literature but, for the purpose for this guide, we will focus on educational institution transitions. Border-crossing theories can be useful for our thinking since they discuss the various borders that exist between children's different life domains, and how breaking down the borders between the domains of family, preschool, and school may benefit children's learning and development.[33] That is the reason why it is so important that parents, kindergartens, and schools determine how they can work together to support children. Related to this question is another question: "Do we prepare children for school or school for children?"

[32] Pia Vogler, Gina Crivello and Martin Woodhead, Early Childhood Development 48, Bernard van Leer Foundation, Early Childhood Transitions research: A review of concepts, theory and practice, 2008
[33] Ibíd., pg. 22

In A ***Good Start*** in Shuto Orizari, one method used to persuade parents to enroll their children in kindergarten was to have the children who liked going to kindergarten go with the children who refused to go to kindergarten. This encouraged the parents to become friends; the parents started meeting regularly in their homes to discuss their children's experiences in kindergarten and their children's development. By sharing their positive experiences, the parents convinced their friends who stopped taking their children to kindergarten because their children refused to go to take their children to school.

Kindergarten Shuto Orizari, Macedonia

**What can you do to make the transition easier?**

– Talk with parents and children about school, and what happens there, what will be different, and what will be the same?
– Make a list with children about what are they expect from school, their worries, and their questions.
– Invite someone from the school like one of their future teachers or a school psychologist, to look at the children's lists, and discuss them with the children.
– Share your practice and your teaching values with your colleagues. Tell your colleagues how you incorporate families' values in your work to make transitions easier for children.
– Prepare children's portfolios and give them to their future teachers, or let children take their portfolios with them to their new school.
– Pay extra close attention to children who may drop out during a transition time. Talk with their parents and ask them what kind of support would be good for their children.
– Collect data about existing supports like free school books, for example, for the poorest families in your group.
– Try to accompany children who have to take a test to enroll in a new school if you think they will face problems with the test. If the child has difficulties speaking in the testing language, make certain that a translator will be available.

Do you have any additional ideas?

## 3. HOW TO IMPROVE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND PARENTING SKILLS?

The home learning environment is very important to early childhood learning and development. The home learning environment includes social relationships, the quality of interactions with children, materials for learning, and the quality time that parents spend with their children (for example, reading or story telling to their children, singing, talking, going out together, playing together, painting, arranging for peers to visit their child at home so they can play together, problem solving, and so on). A good home learning environment is free of hostility and toxic stress, and provides love, security, stimulation, opportunities, and encouragement to help children develop their potential. Good parenting skills are defined as diverse interactions that are warm, loving, and responsive, setting high expectations for the child, and providing a safe and stimulating environment.

All parents want to be good parents, but sometimes, due to poor and distressing life conditions, parents may not be able to achieve their goal. This issue is often present among Roma parents, as well as among the poorest members of the dominant society. Poor living conditions (lack of space, of heating, water, and so on), unemployment, illiteracy, high levels of toxic stress, and a lack of toys, books, and materials for children, all decrease the capacity for practicing good parenting skills. Parents, especially mothers, may feel incompetent and develop depression as a result, which can strongly influence a child's development.

Preschool teachers frequently see this issue in their practice and, if they do, they have to get involved, not by blaming the parents, but by offering support in dealing with these challenges.

**What can you do to support parents?**

– One successful initiative invited Roma mothers, who were illiterate or functionally illiterate, to join their children at the preschool and participate in various learning and play activities with the children. Later, the preschool teacher offered to help the mothers learn how to read and write in kindergarten. The mothers learned how to read and write by learning alongside their children. The experience was enjoyable for everyone and the mothers felt relaxed, happy, and fulfilled during their time in the classroom.

– In some other cases, the kindergarten became a resource center by providing a library with books and toys that parents could borrow to use at home.
– In some initiatives, local health centers and kindergartens organized activities for parents and children in the waiting room of in the health centers. Parents had an opportunity to learn new games and to show what they already know.
– In some kindergartens, preschool teachers share ideas for activities that can be done at home, ideas to improve the home learning environment, and simple strategies that can be used in during everyday interactions with their children on a regular basis with parents.

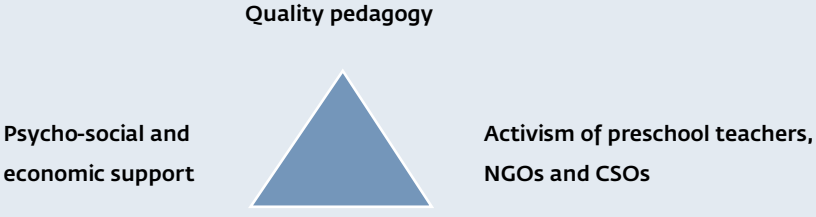
The most important thing is that all these activities are conducted in respectful and inclusive atmosphere; an atmosphere where parents can learn and share what they know, which is highly appreciated. Besides learning and gaining new skills, one of the main goals of these initiatives is to create space and activities for parents, particularly mothers, where they feel happy, joyful, and relaxed and they can enjoy parenthood by leaving all their problems aside for a few hours.

An evaluation of the Hungarian Meséd Project, one of the AGS pilot sites, suggests that AGS has been an effective strategy for engaging and supporting Roma mothers, most of whom have not received more than a primary education. The data shows that the mothers used the learning materials provided by the project and effectively applied the skills that they learned in their groups to promote their children's learning. In addition, they employed the improved parenting practices and developed supportive relationships with other members of their group.
– Mark Kavanagh (2011) Case Study of the Meséd Project, Budapest, Roma Education Fund.

## 4. IS THE QUALITY OF SERVICES ENOUGH TO SUPPORT A CHILD'S SUCCESS, ESPECIALLY WHEN THE CHILD COMES FROM A VULNERABLE GROUP?

Preschool teachers often feel helpless because they still fail to retain all children in their kindergarten and/or they do not see sufficient progress in their children's achievements in spite of all of the effort they put into improving the quality of their work. More and more of the responsibility for a child's success is placed on preschool teachers and early childhood education today, and more people are starting to believe that education will solve all the problems of the Roma people, including the extreme poverty and social exclusion in which some Roma children and families live. This is not a realistic expectation and it places a huge burden on the preschool teacher's shoulders. So what else is needed?

At the DECET – ISSA meeting (Morocco, 2009) a "triangle model" for high-quality programs in the context of ethnic division and exclusion, combined with poverty, was developed. Meeting participants concluded that high-quality programs must have these three components to be effective.




Explanation of these components:

1. **Quality pedagogy** – well-trained professionals and paraprofessionals; comprehensive, inclusive, and respectful curriculum.
2. **Psychosocial and economic support** – providing health care, nutrition, counseling services, protection, and connections to welfare services.
3. **Activism** – readiness to voice the needs and problems of children and families, and to advocate for their rights by openly challenging discriminatory practices.

## 5. CAN PRESCHOOL TEACHERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE ALONE?

Experience from different projects has shown that even the best preschool teachers cannot complete all this work alone. To truly implement a high-quality education and care practice, preschool teachers need support from their peers, associated experts, kindergarten directors, and the community. Real positive impact on a child's well-being, learning, and development will happen if the idea of high-quality practices, inclusion, respect for diversity, equal opportunities, and outcomes are embedded in the policy, program, and plan of the entire kindergarten.

On the kindergarten level, preschool teachers and management, along with participation from parents and community members, need to agree upon:

– Values they share, which can be integrated and presented in the kindergarten's mission
– Philosophy of development, care, and education
– Image of the child
– Goals that they have for children to work toward
– Dreams they have for children to work toward

– Definition of quality and inclusion, and other important concepts
– Engagement of preschool teachers in community activities in an effort to promote the importance of early childhood education for **all** children and the creation of equitable conditions for **all** children to participate, regardless of their ethnicity, ability, race, gender, or language

It is very important that preschool educators and staff operate under a similar set of assumptions, values, and beliefs regarding the most effective ways to support children and their families.

The best way to support the ongoing development of individual preschool teachers, their teams and the whole kindergarten is to organize *reflective learning communities*, which allow preschool teachers to discuss, share their experiences, reflect on their practices, and learn from each other. In these learning communities preschool teachers can reflect on three levels:[34]

– self-reflection: about personal identity and the role of the professional
– team reflection: about the team and cooperation with other parties involved (teams, parents, and children)
– critical reflection: individually, and as part of the team, with the objective of creating social change in the childcare center

### Roma mediators, teaching assistants, and pedagogical assistants – how can they contribute to quality practice?

Persons of Roma origin who work with educational institutions have different titles and different roles in different countries, but, in general, their main activities are focused on:

– Improving access to education,
– Reducing the rate of withdrawal from kindergartens and schools,
– Fighting discrimination,
– Improving academic achievement,
– Improving collaboration with parents, families, and the Roma community.

Research done in Serbia in 2010 with Roma pedagogical assistants,[35] children, parents, teachers, and school directors has shown that the benefits of their work are respectable. All participants in the survey and focus groups agreed that these mediators and assistants contributed to:

[34] Van Keulen & del Barrio Saiz (2010).
[35] OSCE 2010 (Roma Pedagogical Assistants as Agents of Change)

- **Building social cohesion in the educational institution, the local community, and society** – By including Roma children and families in the education system, adapting the school environment to the educational needs of the Roma, ensuring that institutions and centers provide health care and social services to support children and their families, overcoming administrative barriers with the help of local self-governments, and involving the majority population in inclusion-related activities, these mediators and assistants helped move the Roma community from the margins of the society (de-marginalization) and include them in the life of the mainstream society, while helping them to achieve equal footing with others in local communities and the society as a whole.
- **Democratization of education** – Through the active participation of Roma mediators and assistants in the education process, in school governing bodies, and in planning and carrying out activities aimed at providing support for children, these mediators and assistants were able to develop their level of expertise, which resulted in their being treated as equals in the educational practice. The assistants are advocates and promoters who contribute to the creation of the conditions needed to achieve equal rights to high-quality education for Roma.
- **Improving the quality of education and educational outcomes** – By promoting and transmitting the values of the Roma community, the assistants created a better understanding of Roma culture and of the living conditions and the lifestyle of the Roma people. This transmission of information is how Roma traditions, culture, and language become present in the school environment. A better understanding of the educational needs of Roma pupils leads to the individualization of the teachers' approach, the introduction of diverse teaching methods, and the improvement of the school environment. Additional learning support results in a higher level of academic achievement and broader educational prospects. Direct contact with children, by covering the material specified in the curriculum and helping them complete their homework, is especially important.
- When it comes to Roma children, the results are even more impressive. The assistants provide these children with **psycho-social** support, which positively influences the development of a positive self-image, self-confidence, and self-respect in children. These children gain confidence in themselves and others. They develop a sense of belonging to the school community and they feel empowered, happy, and relaxed. The assistants also serve as successful and respected Roma adult role models for Roma children.

Reading about these findings can create ideas on how pedagogical assistants can contribute in all domains of improving quality practice. But it is especially important that educators treat pedagogical assistants with respect; their relationship should not mirror the existing power relations in society nor discriminatory practices towards Roma people.

## ONE FINAL REFLECTION

**After reading this guide, think about the following questions:**

1. How can I be more accessible to the most vulnerable Roma children and families? What biases or prejudices do I need to address? How can I be more empathetic?
2. How can I be more democratic in my practice? How can I show more respect for the rights and needs of children and families?
3. How can I be more open to developing meaningful relationships with families and communities?
4. How can I approach the child's development more holistically, by looking at more than just the development of certain cognitive skills that needed for primary school?
5. How can I better adapt existing services to the changing and diverse needs of children and families?

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Photography © REF | Robert Miskovics and UNICEF | SWZ | 2011 | John McConnico
Graphic design by Anikó Bieder and Balázs Gelsei – cadmium grafiklab.

**With support from the European Union**

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