



Roma Education Fund

PARTNERSHIP GUIDE

for the Promotion of Early Childhood
Education and Care for Roma

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Existing studies have demonstrated that early school enrolment has very positive consequences at later levels of education. Quality educational services during the first years of childhood – before entering compulsory education – increase opportunities for all children and the likelihood of their subsequent success. Children's success can be measured by: learning a common language; acquiring specific habits, routines, and knowledge; increasing self-esteem; and facilitating the socialization process of each individual child in the formal educational system.

As will be discussed later on, early enrolment (children ages 0–3 and 3–6 years old) is very limited due to a number of factors, including the fact that it is not compulsory in most European Union member states and investments made by national governments at this level of education are scarce. These factors, together with the specific needs of different ethnic and minority groups in the various countries of the European Union, makes issues in early childhood education particularly hard to address through the inclusion and integration policies which have been slowly evolving since the 1990s in the European Union.

Investing in quality services from the earliest stages of childhood clearly pays off in terms of higher performance during adulthood. However, these services are far from accessible to the entire European population; there are vast differences between countries and these differences are even more pronounced when it comes to disadvantaged groups such as Roma. Participation in the formal educational system does not simply happen. Participation must take place in a setting where mutual respect for cultural identity is fostered in the context of increasingly diverse European societies.

The low level of education generally characterizing Europe's Romani population limits their possibilities for personal development, contributes to even greater isolation by limiting their communication and interaction with the rest of society, and has negative repercussions on their ability to fully exercise their citizenship. This points to the importance of getting Romani students enrolled in preschool as early as possible because this tends to prevent many types of disadvantages and puts children on the path toward educational mainstreaming, thus allowing them the chance to experience equal opportunity during the course of their lives.

This step towards the early enrolment of Romani children requires commitment from the key players in the educational process of young Romani children. To that end, this guide is intended to be a framework of support. This guide is also intended to spark thought and discussion for all those who participate in these early education processes and who wish to build stable partnerships with a view to improving the services received by preschool

children. It places an emphasis on teamwork between the different actors making up the educational community and beyond in a collaboration leads to enrichment for everyone.

In short, this document is designed to provide ideas on how to incorporate other actors, in addition to teachers and psycho-pedagogical teams, into school life, and thus build a school for all, which will serve as a model for inclusive intercultural education where Romani children, their families, and social surroundings truly belong.

This guide is part of a pan-European pilot project on the coordination of, and research into, methods aimed at the integration of the Romani population entitled: "A Good Start: Scaling-up Access to Quality Services for Young Romani children."

ABOUT A GOOD START

"A Good Start" is a European Union financed project aimed at raising early childhood education and care (ECEC) outcomes 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 Roma youth.

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

The Roma Education Fund lead A Good Start project has three international partners:

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

As well as 12 local partners:

Slovakia

- Cultural Association of Roma in Slovakia (KZRSR)
- Civic Association Equal Chances (Equal Chances)
- County Association of Roma Initiatives (KARI)
- Methodological and Pedagogical Centre Bratislava (MPC Bratislava)

Romania

- Ruhama Foundation
- Romani CRISS

Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

- National Roma Centrum (NRC)
- Roma Education Center "Ambrela" (Ambrela)
- Humanitarian and Charitable Association of the Roma KHAM (KHAM)

Hungary

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

The project was financed by the European Commission Directorate General for Regional Policy (2,046,104.38 EUR). Beyond this grant budget REF involved number of other donors who financed complementary activities to the AGS project in total 437,712 EUR as follows: Bernard van Leer foundation (260,918 EUR), LEGO foundation (107,660 EUR), Network of European Foundations (69,134 EUR).

"A Good Start" (AGS) directly targets over 4,000 Romani and non-Romani children, and their parents and caregivers, with explicit, but non-exclusive, messaging. 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 knowledgeably about their children's educations has increased, and relations between kindergarteners and Roma parents have improved.

Please visit the REF website for further information on the project:

<http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/good-start-eu-roma-pilot>

ROMANI POPULATION AND EDUCATION

The Romani population continues to be one of the most marginalized and socially disadvantaged groups in all of Europe. Living standards are well below average, and poverty and exclusion are extreme in many cases. The Romani population suffers from low levels of education, high unemployment, poor housing, and poor health conditions. Moreover, discrimination is persistent.

The gap between the educational achievements of the Romani population (adult and school-age) and the rest of the population is a factor contributing to the increasing inequality and social exclusion affecting a large proportion of this community. Inequality in the area of education has a negative influence on subsequent labor market integration, and therefore on the development of equal life opportunities as experienced by most citizens.

The following are some of the most important challenges facing the Romani population in the educational process and where public administrations, families, social agencies, and organizations must pay particular attention: early enrolment into the educational system; continued enrolment in the system throughout the compulsory stages of education; reduction of absenteeism and early school leaving before completing compulsory education; advancement to higher studies past the compulsory education level; and lifelong learning for adult Roma. Clearly, the first step in this process is early access to the educational system to set the stage for achievement and to instill the values of lifelong mainstream educational development.

The preschool enrolment of Romani children is heavily affected by a number of factors. On the one hand, families harbor cultural, social, and economic attitudes, including negative opinions about schools, frustration and a resulting lack of motivation to study on the part of students; schools being held in low esteem; social pressure; and the lack of easily accessible role models with an academic background within the Romani population. On the other hand, academic factors are linked to the educational model and context in which enrolment takes place. Here, elements such as training, expectations and awareness on the part of teachers, methodologies, curricular materials, school organization, and a lack of measures favoring interculturalism come into play.

Many of the difficulties encountered in the relationship between the Romani population and the educational system arise from the limited day-to-day functionality of some of the skills taught at school. Encouragingly, the perception that Roma have of education has been evolving towards a more positive attitude in many cases.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

Early childhood education, or preschool education, is for children ages 0 to 6 years old and is designed to contribute to their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development. It is broken down into two stages: the first from ages 0 to 3 years old and the second from 3 to 6 years old. It is voluntary in virtually all countries and is either completely or partially subsidized depending on the country's educational system.

Widespread early enrolment is considered to be a major accomplishment of the educational system that has a positive impact on subsequent school performance. During the two stages of preschool education time is devoted to progressive advancement in the areas of emotional development, movement and body control, communication and language, basic elements of coexistence and social relationships, and the discovery of the physical and social characteristics of our surroundings. An effort is also made to help children achieve a positive and balanced self-image and to become autonomous.

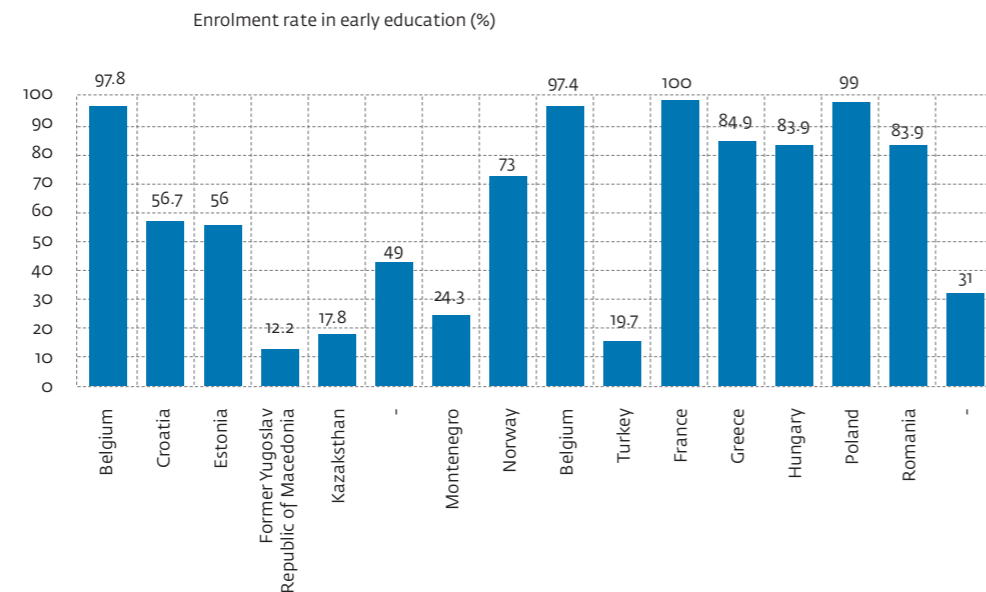
The idea of working with children from as early an age as possible, together with the notion of personal development, dates back to the 19th century, when it emerged together with a new model for schools and teaching methodologies. Initially, programs for children at such an early age were designed more as a service for disadvantaged children who had been abandoned or had lost their parents. Despite the fact that research has time and again shown that learning processes begin very early, educational systems continue to pay little heed to this period of education; it is the key moment which defines children's future development as active members of society. Yet, even today, many public administrations continue to view it as just one more optional service, rather than recognizing it as an educational stage that is crucial to the personal and academic development of children.

The idea of early childhood education as a teaching model stems from a pedagogical approach based on the ideas that children are people able to take control of their own development; the school as a place for educational, personal, and social development; and new forms of educational intervention designed not only to transmit knowledge to students but also to provide them with the tools needed to be able to analyze their reality and their surroundings for themselves, while providing needed support so that young pupils are always able to autonomously take part in decision-making processes at their level.

These ideas contributed to the gradual development of early learning centers from mere service programs to centers of learning aimed at enhancing the development of children.

ROMA PARTICIPATION IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

There is very little information broken down by ethnic group regarding the enrolment and participation of Romani children in preschool education throughout Europe. The results from those countries that do collect data show that the Romani population participates less in early education in comparison with the general population.



SOURCE: OSCE (2010) *Mapping of Participation of Roma and Sinti Children in Early Education processes within the OSCE Region*. OSCE: Warsaw.

Despite the proven benefits of taking part in early education, aspects such as administrative registration requirements, selection processes, sign-up fees and other expenses, distance to the center, and unmotivated families (for several reasons: availability of other family members to take care of children; not knowing teachers; and centers that fail to take account of diversity management in their curriculum), significantly impact the reduced enrolment of Romani children ages 0 to 6 years old in preschool.

QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND THE PREVENTION OF INEQUALITY AT SCHOOL AND IN SOCIETY

Quality education for all requires effort from members of the educational community and from the communities in which that education is taking place. Public administrations, in particular, are faced with the challenge of working together and collaborating on comprehensive educational policies which boost equal opportunity for all citizens.

Kindergarten is a place where important socialization processes are ongoing. The processes link people and families, and serve as the basis for interaction in neighborhoods, towns, and beyond. However, a broad and integrated notion of education forces us to consider that neither can it be carried out exclusively within the confines of the formal educational system nor can it be strictly relegated to compulsory education.

A policy of quality education should be able to identify the set of circumstances leading to the "vulnerability" of certain neighborhoods, sectors, and social groups and then intervene with the needed educational initiatives both in and outside of schools. Hence, the need for government administrations to address the educational disadvantages of Romani students at compulsory levels of education by promoting their early incorporation into the educational system and by coming up with other solutions outside of the school context to respond to the needs related to the socio-cultural situation in which Roma families are immersed.

The education and socialization of Romani children requires providing places and opportunities for intervention as a way to supplement and broaden the offerings made in the formal school setting, which is often glaringly insufficient. To achieve this goal, and in the absence of governmental leadership and policies in this domain, different grass-roots organizations, associations, and NGOs are carrying out initiatives designed to enhance the educational opportunities for Romani children, adapt methods and strategies to their interests and needs, expand education in non-formal settings, and supplement these efforts with initiatives within the school context by incorporating the Roma families themselves in the process.

However, while these initiatives are noteworthy, the people carrying them out are not yet highly regarded in educational circles and their work continues to be considered detrimental to the needed coordination and cooperation with all other education professionals.

Early childhood education has the potential to correct the unending spiral of social inequality that may be caused by a child's inability to adapt to the educational system, which may lead to academic failure or dropping out of school. This is where educational systems can either contribute to, or help reduce, inequality. There is the potential to turn the educational system into a fundamental factor of equality among people. For the educational system to operate as a mechanism to prevent inequality, then the early childhood stage needs to provide real education working hand-in-hand with the professionals involved in the process as opposed to being merely a day-care program.

Issues can be addressed at this stage of education that are difficult to correct later in life, such as the development of a sense of belonging to the academic class and eliminating stereotypes and barriers, which a few years down the line, Romani and non-Romani children alike will have incorporated into their social psyche, hence preventing their full integration into the system around them. That is why it is equally crucial to avoid the segregation of Romani children in the educational system, an issue that emerges at later levels of education.

Preventing inequality is something that requires a global effort from everyone and, to this end, we would stress the need for teachers with a global vision of childhood and with the proper training needed to face the challenges of today's culturally diverse schools.

In short, quality preschool education must be capable of identifying the needs of different groups and providing adapted solutions in order to achieve the aim of equal opportunity for all students at the preschool level and beyond. In the case of the Romani population, this will sometimes require social and educational support programs targeting both students and families.

Assessment of the quality of early childhood education must take the mainstreaming process, as opposed to mere enrolment, into account because the physical presence of children in school, when in a situation of socio-educational disadvantage, which often is the case of the Romani population, does not guarantee their social and academic integration. Also, in response to the shift in educational priorities, it is important to evaluate the effects of educational programs from a broad perspective that not only considers enrolment figures, attendance, and academic performance, but also focuses on "social competencies," that is, the ability of students to adapt to social expectations and roles, and their capacity for self-realization. In other words, taking broader objectives related to students' adaptation at school into account.

Educational mainstreaming means recognizing that there is a somewhat rigid criteria for what is considered normal when comparing a student or group of students to this standard. The educational mainstreaming of the Romani population therefore means comparing the degree to which this group of students achieves what the school system considers normal in the skill development process.

Educational mainstreaming means the right of all children to access to public education on an equal footing so that children gain the instruments needed for full development in the aspects that facilitate their academic and social adaptation and their subsequent incorporation into society as active members. Educational mainstreaming has to do with gaining access to the educational system, adapting to schedules, routines and rules, social interaction, academic achievement, relationships between families and school, and the right to be different. All of these aspects are variables that must be assessed when considering the degree of educational mainstreaming of Romani children.

STRIVING FOR AN INTERCULTURAL AND INCLUSIVE MODEL THAT RECOGNIZES THE RIGHT TO BE DIFFERENT

One of the most important challenges facing education is the creation of a quality system that can set the stage for equal opportunity through respect for diversity and by providing values and cultural diversity training for citizens.

The growing cultural diversity of European societies, which has sparked changes in the political, social, and economic arenas, is also reflected in schools and presents new challenges for educational systems. Schools should view cultural diversity as opportunities for enrichment and social and cultural growth. However, if efforts are not made to integrate all students from the earliest stages of school, a focus on conflict will be created which is difficult to resolve. This means that the daily management of schools must adapt to today's social needs in terms of cultural diversity.

Interculturalism as a diversity management model presents a challenge to schools. The difference between this model and other models is that it puts the educational focus on diversity from the very beginning of preschool. A focus on diversity in schools from an intercultural perspective implies change: significant change in the messages transmitted and how they are transmitted. One of the basic aims of such a policy is encouraging positive feelings of unity and tolerance among students and reducing stereotypes. Intercultural education focuses on the systematic training of the entire student body and not only on children who are members of minority ethnic or cultural groups.

The methodological principles underpinning intercultural education are based on the acknowledgement of every student's personal right to receive the best possible tailored education with a focus on the formation of personal identity; positive reinforcement of different cultures and languages; non-segregation of groups in or outside of the classroom; proactive responses against any manifestation of racism or discrimination; prevention of prejudices and stereotypes; active communication and relationships among all students; participation of families in school activities and enhanced communication and relations among different ethnic groups; and active

participation of the school in the local community. To achieve all of this, it is essential to devise new continuous education schemes for teachers, develop pedagogical frameworks for schools, and draft appropriate work materials.

The school experience at the preschool level should be motivating and exciting for children and educational values should be fun. To achieve this goal, it is important to introduce all activities, regardless of the subject, in an attractive and dynamic way.

If the quality of education is to improve, methodologies must be adapted to the characteristics of the student body taking into account of the needs and social backgrounds of the students. Also, the extent to which educational objectives have been achieved must be assessed.



BUILDING STABLE AND SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION OF ROMANI CHILDREN

Romani children are progressively entering the school system at different rates in different European countries due to the efforts made by educational professionals, schools, other social agents, and the families themselves. However, managing diversity in an inclusive manner in today's schools is no easy task.

If we are to continue down this path, it is crucial to obtain the commitment of all those involved in the educational process who must work together in a coordinated fashion. To do so, it is essential to undertake a reflection and negotiation process that includes: identification of who the key agents are; what role each agent should play; what factors facilitate and promote partnering; and how these partners can organize collaboration among the different pieces of the educational puzzle over the long-term.

THE VALUE ADDED BY WORKING TOGETHER

In the case of Romani children facing situations of socio-cultural disadvantage, the achievement of these objectives requires the teamwork of different professionals because children's needs go beyond the strictly educational to material shortcomings, health issues, housing problems, and so on. The very detection of these needs requires the intervention of professionals who are often located outside of the school context. Specifically, the intermediary figures – social service agents, mediators, associations, and so on – who act as the link between families and schools must intervene to detect these needs. These intermediary professionals are even more important when it comes to entering children into early childhood education institutions.

Teamwork among different professionals who are all working together increases the opportunities offered to children and achieves greater support. Accordingly, the more actors supporting a school project, the greater its sustainability. Once the most suitable and necessary people are identified, teamwork enhances negotiating

power, makes it easier to reach decision-makers, and increases the influence that can be exerted on public administrations and those key individuals and institutions with the power to remedy situations of exclusion.

Isolated efforts to educate Romani children, especially at the preschool level, can lead to frustration and a lack of motivation on the part of families and students. It can also have a negative influence on future academic performance and reinforce stereotypes and prejudices against the Romani population within the educational community. Fostering a culture of partnership and knowing how to organize it is therefore critical in achieving common objectives.

During the preparation of the initial "A Good Start" proposal REF used its country assessments and prepared locality specific data tables and concept notes in order to better examine the local legal framework and relevant practices and tailor the planned intervention to the Roma families' needs and to the partners' capacities. This process involved several meetings, discussions and debates.

As part of the preparation the Pilot Operational Manual was prepared, stating the overall goal, the managerial rules and the reporting structure. The project was based in transparency, was implemented by the Pilot Management Team (PMT), four Country Project Teams, the Monitoring and Evaluation Team and the Policy Development Team.

Implementing the A Good Start was a classical example of teamwork. The project was based on the partnership and close cooperation of the implementing organizations as described above, high-profile experts and local project teams. The management structure is designed to ensure broad participation of different professionals with relevant expertise, at various levels in the implementation of the activities; synergy between the separate activities; and a smooth coordination between the members of the team. The nature of the project requires strong coordination and smooth interaction between the participants in it.

During the project implementation a working method emerged that could be nominated as Cooperative partnership between all the actors (consortium partners, local partners, World Bank, UNDP). Thanks to this the implementation problems were solved flexibly and common procedures and further steps were agreed if needed. This was an important value added of the project, where all these partners equally contributed, it helped the preparation of the effective execution of the activities.

KEY PLAYERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS

While the different professionals who take part in the preschool educational process each have something to contribute, it is also true that not all professionals have the same level of responsibility, commitment, and

impact. This fact points to the importance of identifying the key actors in the preschool education of the Romani population and what role each one of them plays:

- **The educational community** is a term which includes everyone working at schools, that is, the administrative teams, teachers, and support personnel, with different professional backgrounds. The educational community is responsible for the area and the most important aspects of this process. They are the ones who are, or should be, responsible for activities (ranging from think-tanks to dialogue and programming) with the rest of those involved.
- **Families and the Romani community** have varying expectations of the education system and its processes. Families are a decisive factor in all educational processes and have the capacity to motivate their children from a very early age.
- **Romani students, and** their participation in the educational process, also depends on the socio-economic context of their family, the way education is viewed in their family, and role models who may or may not facilitate their participation in the education process.
- **Public administrators**, ranging from the local to the national and with differing competences in education and other areas, are directly related to early childhood education depending on the country. Public administrators are responsible for incorporating Romani children into society. They play a key role insofar as they are responsible for the political decisions that affect the system as a whole, and the educational system in particular, and have a lot to say about the development of schools and their various components.
- **Social agencies and organizations** are typically responsible for the non-regulated sectors of education where meetings are organized and informal learning takes place, which can be instrumental in shaping behavior and facilitating formal educational processes. These agencies and organizations are particularly important in situations with a risk of social exclusion because they play a decisive role as motivators within Roma communities and as mediators with other stakeholders.

THE ROLE OF EACH ACTOR

There is a wide variety of agents taking part in the educational mainstreaming process and each agent has a particular contribution to make and a particular degree of commitment to the process.

The educational community: administrative teams, teachers, and support personnel.

The educational community plays a key role in the implementation of educational processes, especially in making sure that these are built with input from all community members and are based on interculturalism, coexistence at school, and respect for differences. They must take advantage of their position from within the school system to involve all parties. This is clearly not an easy task given that schools are a mirror image of the diverse society in which we live and are at the center of the socialization process.

As the highest authority within each school, the **administrative team** is able to dictate curricular guidelines, which is precisely where we may locate the response to school diversity, multiculturalism, and values development. These ideas must be reflected in the curricular guidelines so that it is certain that this single enrolment school system promotes intercultural education, equal opportunity, and the personal development of all students, including those who start out from a position of socio-cultural disadvantage, such as Romani pupils.

The administrative team, as the designer of the school's curriculum, can have a number of different effects on the academic development of Romani children: in the selection of teaching methods; the incorporation of engaging and interesting content in teaching plans; the selection of appropriate teaching material; the analysis and review of teaching practices; teacher training; and partnerships between teachers and other types of educators.

Teachers serve as role models for many Romani children and, in many instances, are children's first and only role models outside of the confines of their own community, especially when Romani families are physically segregated from the rest of society. While their primary objective may be to cover the prescribed academic curriculum, teachers should not be limited to merely transmitting knowledge; teachers should also accompany students from the very outset of the preschool stage in their journey towards building their own identity void of stereotypes and prejudices, and incorporating values of solidarity, cooperation, respect for diversity, and reinforcement of the many skills each person has.

To be able to properly perform their duties, teachers need adequate training and access to teaching materials and group dynamic exercises adapted to the diversity characterizing the societies in question. Romani students should see themselves reflected in these materials and the course content. Likewise, the school work should be done from an intercultural perspective.

One of the main responsibilities of teachers is **daily classroom management** and, in this sense, teachers either can build a hostile environment where Romani children feel excluded or a warm environment that is motivating and exciting.

Teachers should view classroom management as an integrated system of basic skills enabling children to handle the relationships they will encounter in the classroom and a tool that must foster an atmosphere of cooperation and respect. There are four main factors, which depend on the teacher, that have an influence on the classroom atmosphere and student relations:

- The **organization, environment, and structure of the physical space** where the learning takes place. Particularly in preschool, this space should be bright and open, and chairs should be arranged so that all of the children can see and interact directly with one another. Emphasis should be placed on group work and group

dynamics that involve and encourage the participation of all students. Classroom decoration incorporating symbols or images relating to Romani culture is a way of contributing to the recognition and inclusion of Romani children.

– The **type and intensity of the teacher-student relationship** which can be one-way or two-way.

Relationships should be established on the basis of equal treatment. If a student senses inequalities in the relationship, it will determine the students' behavior, which is even more likely with young children.

Hierarchies naturally exist; however, the way children are treated can facilitate a sense of respect from teachers towards their students, which is often lacking in the case of Romani children. Likewise, the lack of respect from students towards their teachers will be greatly diminished if class dynamics are based on participatory learning and dialogue.

– **Interpersonal relationships emerging amongst groups of children** based on mutual respect and recognition. To achieve these relationships, especially at the preschool level, the development of dynamics based on game play, which helps students get to know one another and fosters the sharing of ideas, knowledge, and thoughts, is highly recommended. Teachers play a crucial role in this process as they attempt to enhance the skills and capacities of Romani children and make these visible to their classmates.

– The **methodology used to establish rules concerning behavior in class**. Under the inclusive and intercultural school model, rules should be collectively created and then negotiated between teachers and students after the students have negotiated the rules amongst themselves. This process is very interesting at the preschool level because it establishes the basis for the collective development of knowledge and behaviours that are respectful of diversity in the classroom. Taking part in group decision-making on an equal footing with the rest of their classmates will be something new for many Romani children who are not accustomed to this sort of participatory culture.

Generally, teachers' expectations of their Romani students are lower than those of their non-Romani classmates and this calls for more specific training, greater coordination between administrations, and meetings and exchanges between professionals working with Roma in an effort to generate learning communities and jointly develop best practices.

In most cases, teachers describe a need for advice when it comes to issues of interculturalism and a lack of sufficiently developed networks of educational experiences and teaching resources that can be disseminated and used by teachers with their Romani students and their families. In some cases, teachers have developed their own specific teaching material to fill these voids. These needs are even greater in the case of early childhood education given that the Romani population has only recently begun to show interest in this stage of education.

But this work cannot be confined strictly to the classroom. Schools must be open to the families of their students in order to foster an environment of mutual trust that is built through joint collaboration and the participation of families in the everyday life of the school. If a connection is to be made with each family, schools must be aware of

the family's reality and adapt to their needs, which, in the case of Romani families, usually extend beyond educational matters to include material needs (food, transport, and so on), health needs (vaccinations, hygiene, medical check-ups, and so on), and other needs. In this regard, teachers can serve as the link to specialized professionals (social services, health centers, associations, and so on) that inform the professionals of the needs of their students and their families.

In order to move forward with this joint participation among the different stakeholders, schools should involve people with different professional backgrounds: teachers, social workers, counselors; and people in a position to intervene as mediators between teachers and families. Mediators help to build bridges of dialogue that establish relationships based on equality between Romani families – despite their distrust of schools – and teaching professionals – despite their low expectations and initial rejection of Romani students – can have frank and constructive conversations to better achieve their common goals: the proper development of all students.

While having specialized professionals in schools adds value (teachers' aides, diversity specialists, cultural mediators, pedagogical counsellors, and so on), there is also a risk that this specialization could inhibit the rest of the educational community, since the educational community may feel that the students have become the exclusive responsibility of the specialized professional. This is not the case, however. All students are the responsibility of all the teachers who are committed to a common educational project.

Families and the Romani community

All family-related aspects play a vital role in the educational inclusion of Romani students in school activities and in academic performance. Given this connection, families can lend a hand with the academic progress of their sons and daughters, and contribute to guaranteeing the effectiveness of their education, and therefore a high priority should be placed on the partnership between families and schools.

However, we must keep in mind that for Roma communities schools represent the cultural majority and a symbol of assimilation, rather than respect of ethnic minorities. The school system tends to standardize students' experiences: one official language; one way of transmitting knowledge; rigid instrumental objectives; a standard model of family and family relations; one way of communicating; and so on. Romani families do not feel that their Romani cultural identity is respected and they may view the possible loss of identity from sending their children to schools conceived by non-Roma professionals as a threat.

However, along with these attitudes there is a growing trend towards a greater appreciation of schooling and education as the basic means of attaining social advancement, personal development, and future opportunities.

Families pass on behavioral patterns, limited expectations, lack of motivation, and frustrations to their children, which tend to keep current social differences intact. In many cases the families facing situations of social exclusion transmit resignation and mistrust towards other social groups along with the perception of belonging to a group that lacks the characteristics which society values. The educational system plays a vital role in reinforcing and supporting families with children in school by simply putting value on, and calling attention to, the values that Romani students bring to the school and by approaching the issues affecting their children in a positive manner and by not constantly stressing negative aspects.

We often find that Romani families and schools only communicate when there is a problem or difficulty. In these cases, families are either fearful or blame the teachers for their children's failure. Also, in situations of socio-economic disadvantage or cultural differences, the language or communication mechanisms used are often inappropriate and may lead to mutual misunderstanding between teachers and families.

In order to avoid these situations and promote good relations between Romani families and schools, it is important to establish an atmosphere of collaboration and regular, fluid communication between parents and school professionals. From the very beginning, parents must be informed of their children's experience at school, their achievements, and their difficulties, so that parents are empowered to make decisions throughout their child's education and to play an active part in it.

We must also consider that, in many cases, situations of poverty and social exclusion make it more difficult for students to succeed in mainstream educational processes. Poor living conditions in terms of economic resources, housing, health, and so on have a great impact on Romani students and their educational attainment. Low levels of education on the part of parents can further widen the gap between family and school, and exacerbate the difficulties encountered in family-school interactions, thus hindering the child's adaptation to mainstream schooling. It is therefore important for public administrators, mostly at the local level, and other social agents to address these shortcomings and implement measures, programs and support schemes to overcome the socio-economic disadvantages of Roma families and their low level of education. Working together in partnerships with an integral and multidisciplinary approach is, in this case, more important than ever.

The mediator's role is especially important in segregated or impoverished areas, both in terms of the initial distribution of resources for Romani children and getting them enrolled, for accompaniment during the educational process, where necessary, and as a channel of communication among Romani families, preschools, and the professionals working there.

Romani students

The process of enrolment of a Romani child in early education can be more complex than in case of a child from the majority population: in addition to the characteristics and services offered by the school, the parents typically consider the sort of treatment their children will receive from the school and its teachers due to their ethnic origin; what are the references they will find regarding their own culture; what values will be taught and whether these values coincide with what the child has learned from their family and community; whether they will be accepted by their classmates; what language will be used in the classroom, along with a range of other concerns.

If the students in question are also socially and economically disadvantaged or in a situation of exclusion, difficulties may arise which will interfere with the school integration process: the distance to the school from their place of residence; lack of transportation to school; lack of documentation; and material shortcomings, such as lack of school clothes, classroom materials, and so on. These issues point to the need for socially and economically disadvantaged students and families to seek support systems outside of the school to supplement school resources.

However, in the specific case of Romani students, one of the most important aspects requiring work is the students' motivation to actively participate in school life. Actions should be undertaken to motivate students as they embark upon their new studies, to involve them in the practical aspects of the learning they will acquire, to undertake activities prior to immersing them in the school environment, and to accompany them at the beginning of the school experience.

One of the key processes in bringing disadvantaged students into the school system is the initial diagnosis of their school needs. An accurate and timely evaluation is vital to the subsequent adoption of suitable pedagogical measures, adaptation of the curriculum, and use of the necessary resources enabling these students to develop all of their capacities as is their right. However, this process must not imply segregation based on ethnic origin, socio-educational conditions, or mother tongue.

Another key factor is the relationship between Romani students and their classmates. In order to encourage the interaction of Romani students with their classmates, teachers should foster: activities which reflect positively on students, where they can show their skills and, thus, improve the way they are perceived by other students; cooperation in free-time and recreational activities; new games and situations where students have similar skills; and promote dispute settlement skills and active participation.

Student participation, which is linked to a sense of belonging to the school, is a very positive element in developing approaches for inclusive, early intercultural education. To that end, classroom work should encourage students to get more involved in their own learning processes, to participate in the development of the rules, to assume responsibilities, and to learn to make decisions even at a very early age. Student participation is a

learning process, a type of training, and not just a form of classroom management. This result is particularly true in the case of Romani students. Participation enhances the quality of decision-making and the satisfaction of students reduces resistance to change and raises awareness of the different cultures present in the classroom with a focus on enrichment and growth.

In short, educational mainstreaming of the youngest children is a process where values are promoted, attitudes developed, procedures regulated, and strategies and aptitudes are learned. And this process is also where the educational system and teachers need to make a greater effort to reach Romani students, more than in just coursework. If this goal is to be achieved, educational institutions need to facilitate matters. The school curriculum must be able to adapt to the needs of its students. Flexibility and diversification of teaching methods contributes to the overall motivation of students.

Public administrators

Education is a right of all citizens and the responsibility of the public administrators that must provide the necessary means to make the educational system inclusive so it promotes equal opportunity for all.

In most cases, the role of state administrators is limited to establishing the general educational framework and guidelines, while the major education responsibilities lie with the regional or local authorities. Sometimes the regional or local authorities simply take charge of economic issues but do not design educational policy.

The public administrators are critical to the different stakeholders taking part in education insofar as they make decisions regarding the economic resources to be invested in the educational system, the design and model of educational policies, and all the supplementary resources affecting the proper development of education (social services, social benefits, housing and health policies, and so on).

When designing approaches and models for an education policy, administrators should get input from the entire educational community, especially when addressing the aspects that are critical to promoting intercultural and inclusive education leading to equal opportunity for all. The direct experience and collective know-how of the large group of professionals working at schools, who are familiar with the shifting realities and needs of students, adds value to policy design and resource allocation. Communication between administrators and the educational community must be fluid and continuous. To that end, regular and ongoing meetings must be arranged to guarantee greater coordination and collaboration for the exchange of ideas and proposals, adaptation and incorporation of materials into the curriculum, improvement of teaching methods, and so on.

What education professionals want from public administrators is less red tape, greater teaching autonomy and flexibility to set up alternative plans to adapt to the specific requirements of pupils and students, and the ability

to make classes more engaging (this is despite the fact that at the preschool stage there is greater flexibility in terms of course content and the need to strictly follow the official curriculum). This is true for working both with non-Romani as well as Romani children. Education professionals also call for the improvement of teacher training in all aspects related to education as a means to overcoming inequalities. These teacher trainings should also address intercultural education as well as the curricular, methodological, and organizational issues that arise from the educational difficulties experienced by Romani students facing situations of socio-educational disadvantage as they are incorporated into the school system.

Another of the most frequently made requests by schools to their competent administrators is for specific support personnel to supplement or reinforce teachers' efforts with Romani students, both in the classroom and with families (mediators, education counselors, interpreters, and so on). Lastly, schools highlighted the need for an increase in economic and material resources (scholarships, transportation, cafeteria programs, school materials, and so on) which, in light of the precarious situation of the Romani population, are vital for the proper educational development of Romani children.

Depending on the local or regional administrators, as the case may be, social and educational services are crucial factors in the early childhood education of Romani students. These services detect the need for school or socio-educational support and refer the student to the most appropriate resource or offer resources directly. Teachers are calling for greater effort on the part of social services and for more focused work with families to foster their involvement in the education of their children, beginning with the early incorporation of their children into the education system. In some cases, where the family situation is more serious and directly affects the welfare of the children, the schools themselves request that social services take a more active approach with families in bad socio-economic straits, who are often Roma, through closer monitoring (especially of children).

For their part, social services call on administrative teams and teachers to familiarize themselves with the integration schemes and programs implemented by social services that affect their students, including Romani students, and the public resources that are available to the most disadvantaged groups.

Since different levels of public administrators are responsible for financing socio-educational reinforcement and support actions for students facing social and educational disadvantages, such as Romani children, that are implemented either through public services (social, educational, health, and so on) or private social entities, these administrators need to be made aware of a drawback noted by the social services and schools themselves: the lack of continuity between the projects and the people responsible for selecting the groups the project will target, what programs the project will offer, and which public service personnel will be involved in the project. The sporadic nature of these actions hinders the programming of activities and projects over the long term.

The geographical distribution of schools where Roma students are enrolled is notably unbalanced given that Romani families tend to be concentrated in certain neighborhoods or urban areas and there is a high density of Romani populations in rural areas. This segregation at school hinders standardized learning and limits the likelihood of academic success. Even worse, the segregated school or group falls even further behind other students resulting in isolation and further contributing to marginalization. It is the responsibility of local administrators to prevent the segregation of Romani students in certain schools, based on geographical factors, as a way of ensuring social cohesion and equal opportunity for all students. Given that the concentration of Romani populations is typically in defined areas, the support of the local and regional administrators responsible for housing is needed. If Romani children are to be integrated at school, educational policies must go hand-in-hand with the social policies that affect Romani children and their families. There must be a focus on encouraging integration and implementing comprehensive policies that promote inclusion processes for Romani families, not only within the sphere of education but also in the areas of housing, employment, health, and so on.

If educational institutions and local administrators are included in the everyday activities of schools, together with the participation of parents, and everyone has the same objectives when making decisions that concern the education of their children, then this participatory process will help to gradually change the negative perception people have of Roma communities and, over time, a more friendly climate will be achieved where communication and teamwork between institutions and families has become a reality.

social agencies and organizations

Non-profit social organizations that work to combat exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination have been drawing attention to situations of inequality all over Europe for years and have been trying to implement measures designed to provide social services for the most disadvantaged groups, such as Romani populations. These non-profit social organizations have also tried to empower disadvantaged groups by creating equal opportunities and establishing an equal footing with all other citizens. The long road travelled by these organizations has been possible due to joint action frameworks with other public and private organizations.

Non-profit social organizations are very familiar with the realities facing the populations they serve and, therefore, the participation of these organizations in all spheres of action within the education system contributes to a global perspective, a focus on diversity and, most importantly, making the system more user friendly for their beneficiaries.

The presence of intermediaries (mediators, associations, NGOs) is becoming more and more common in the relationship between schools and Romani families due to the needs of the Romani families themselves. Without their support, the marginalization and exclusion would be even worse. Marginalization and exclusion would also

be greater without intermediaries because administrators realize that their services and resources are not reaching certain groups, thus limiting social cohesion.

Associations and NGOs specifically devoted to the Romani population, as well as those targeting broader groups, undertake a variety of socio-educational measures, such as: building relationships with the nearby social, educational, and health services; facilitating awareness-raising work with families; implementing school enrolment promotion campaigns and initiatives to prevent early school leaving; offering academic support and monitoring programs; providing material resources (class material, food for the cafeteria, transport, scholarships, and so on); and conducting reading workshops for Roma parents and their children.

Mediators are important school support facilitators who are increasingly requested by teachers and social services. They can play an essential role in establishing constructive communication among families, schools, and social services, and mediators can facilitate communication among, and understanding of, different cultures, which promotes collaboration, mutual recognition, and the elimination of negative stereotypes that can often be a stumbling block to dialogue and trust. Mediators, typically members of the Romani community, serve as first-hand role models for Romani families and set an example for action. Their work mostly focuses on getting Romani families, and the Romani community, to accept the educational system and support teachers.

The work of mediators is even more important when it comes to early enrolment at the preschool stage because this level of education is not compulsory. Therefore, mediators need to use strategies and arguments that make sense within the context of the Romani community in order to convince Romani families to enrol their children in preschool. Roma, or non-Roma, mediators must be very familiar with the verbal and non-verbal language of the Romani population if they are to be effective.

FACTORS PROMOTING PARTNERSHIPS

- **An inclusive political-institutional framework**, where the decision-makers, or those who can influence decisions, make a social commitment to citizens to promote social cohesion and to fully incorporate the most disadvantaged groups, like the Romani population, into society. The public administrators, politicians, and political institutions need to provide the necessary tools for combating inequality and discrimination, and removing the barriers that stand in the way to full citizenship for a segment of society.
- Politicians are responsible for creating an open and inclusive political-institutional framework that contains solutions adapted to helping the most disadvantaged groups and making certain that this focus does not lead to backlash from the dominant society. This goal can be accomplished if various forces work together and if there is a major political commitment to making all citizens understand that the incorporation of the most disadvantaged groups and recognition of their social, economic, and cultural contributions to society benefits everyone.

- **A flexible intercultural educational system which acknowledges and values differences.** In order to promote the incorporation of Romani children into early education, we need an educational system that recognizes the value of education as a factor contributing to social cohesion and as a path towards the social inclusion of groups facing socio-educational disadvantages, such as the Romani population.
- We need an educational framework that operates from an intercultural perspective and is open to the diversity which characterizes today's societies, that acknowledges the right to be different at school, and that promotes quality education for everyone. All available tools should be used to achieve this goal (school curriculum, academic programming, teaching materials, and so on) and all of the needed human resources and support, ranging from highly qualified teachers to specialized personnel such as mediators, should be made available in support of this goal. If the educational system really wants to offer quality education for everyone, including students facing the greatest disadvantages, it should be flexible enough to adapt to the needs and conditions of these students, while remaining open to families and their communities.
- **A shared project.** In order to promote partnerships, the different stakeholders participating in the education of Romani children – the educational community, families, administrations, and social workers – must share common values, approaches, and objectives. It is important to promote communication between families and teachers that is based on trust and occurs on an equal footing.
- Work must be done with families to make them aware of the value of education for their children and of the importance of beginning that education at the preschool level, to eliminate cultural barriers (“schools were designed for majority population”), and to get families involved in the educational objectives of their children. It is equally important to raise the awareness of the educational community, to train teachers, and familiarize them with Romani culture because ignorance breeds rejection and discrimination. Teachers must learn to appreciate the skills and capacities Romani children have learned from their families and communities.
- **Network of measures and professionals needs to be organized to accompany students** and their families throughout process of incorporation into the school system, where students and families need such support. The objective is to mitigate or address material shortcomings (scholarships, food in the cafeteria, transportation, access to social benefits, and so on), educational needs (tutoring for students and training for families), healthcare support (check-ups, vaccinations, treatments, and so on), and support in the search for employment and dignified housing. All of these factors directly or indirectly affect the educational process of Romani children.
- It is therefore necessary to mobilize different professionals to adequately address all these factors. Administrators need to assign the human and material resources to facilitate this process, and social services need to monitor families more closely in order to detect possible needs.
- Administrators often have to delegate this responsibility to those social agents (associations, NGOs, mediators, and so on) who, due to their knowledge and familiarity, are better equipped to approach Roma families, especially in the most extreme cases of marginalization and exclusion. It is still the responsibility of

the public sector to ensure that all children are in school and are treated equally, although the actual work may be carried out by specialized entities. To this end, public resources must be allocated and there must be a commitment made to sustainability over time so that these duties are at least performed with a medium-term perspective to obtain effective results.

- **Coordination mechanisms.** As already mentioned, the incorporation of children from difficult socio-economic backgrounds into the educational system, especially early on, requires a network of measures and professionals working together on this joint project. Therefore, coordination mechanisms must be in place, or must be created, to allow for the proper operation of this joint project. Disparate efforts and a lack of coordination often leads to repetition of the same actions and people pulling in opposite directions by employing approaches that are often contradictory; in short, it is a waste of resources and effort.
- Given that education for all children is a public responsibility, governments must put the necessary coordination mechanisms in place for all public services and resources (social services, education, health, housing, employment, and so on) and then coordinate the work of these services with private initiatives. Public-private partnership is essential. Even in cases where resources are mainly private, if they are not linked and coordinated with public services, the goal of fully incorporating the Romani population as full-fledged citizens will not be achieved.

ROAD MAP FOR THE BUILDING OF SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

While we are aware that each case is different, experience shows that there are certain steps and processes that positively contribute to establishing a basis for the building of partnerships to promote the education of Romani children.

- **Needs assessment.** Before drafting an action plan it is important to define the needs that must be addressed. Many factors, not only those related to education, come into play when incorporating Romani children into the educational system and, therefore, it is important to be familiar with the situation of each child and their social context (family, extended community, and so on), and to identify the areas that require support so that educational mainstreaming may be achieved. The approach taken must vary with: children in rural areas instead of in urban areas; children in completely segregated areas instead of children that are not in segregated areas; and children who speak a language that is different from the official language, and so on. In most cases, the socio-economic factors of the family mark the difference. The greater the degree of exclusion, poverty, and marginalization of the family, the greater their needs. The analysis must also be flexible because socio-economic conditions and needs may shift and may be temporary.
- **Identification of potential stakeholders and available resources.** Once the analysis is conducted and the needs are defined, it is important to become familiar with the context in which the process will be undertaken and to know who is on the team and what resources are available. We must first of all include

the family, which is where different professionals come into play who will work with families in awareness-raising and demonstrating the value of education for their children. The professionals with the skills to engage with families and motivate them to make this decision tend to be from different professional backgrounds, that is, social services, mediators, and associations, Roma and non-Roma.

– We must be very familiar with the available resources and how they work so as not to duplicate efforts and rather work in a complementary fashion. If resources are already available and in operation (public or private), they should be reinforced and opened to the Romani population. In other words, members of the Romani community should be included as beneficiaries. Even in this case, it is usually necessary to create specific support and reinforcement systems to compensate for existing inequalities and the serious socio-economic disadvantage faced by the Romani population.

– **Joining forces and allocating responsibilities.** It is important to join forces and to work in a coordinated and complementary manner, with each actor playing their own role. To achieve this goal, it is essential to know the responsibilities and commitments of each stakeholder in the task of bringing Romani children into the educational system, while taking each person's unique skills into account. For example, families cannot be required to perform tasks or to make commitments for which they are not prepared, and other stakeholders (social services, associations, mediators) must refrain from overstepping their bounds and assuming responsibilities that must be taken on by families. Failure to define tasks or responsibilities in this process often leads to frustration and a situation where families blame schools or social agencies, and vice versa, when things go poorly.

– **Written agreements to ensure commitment.** Written agreements are important (although not always essential), or advisable, defining who is doing what and how it is managed, specifying the timeline and the invested resources. In one of the Good Start (AGS) localities, the AGS local implementing partner is working in partnership with the County Center for Resources and Educational Assistance. However, there is no written agreement, the center has been active in recommending experts, and involved in preparing and testing children to see who needs help from the experts (in psychology/ speech therapy, and so on).

– **Define clear leadership.** It is the responsibility of the public administrators to ensure that all children are enrolled in the educational system on an equal footing with everyone else. To do that, extra help must be given to those facing the greatest difficulties but this process is almost never led by the public administrators. If this process is to work, clear leadership, which is recognized by all stakeholders, must be defined. This role is typically assumed by the people or social entities able to relate to, and communicate with, the families and the Romani community. The person in this role must also communicate with schools and all other public services to establish relationships that are built on equality as opposed to hierarchal relationships. This sort of leadership is based on know-how, experience, and communication skills, and not on possession of resources. This fact means that the leader must be able to intervene at any stage of the process for the purpose of review, adjustment, improvement and change of conditions, and so on by negotiating with all parties as equals.

– **Creating partnership with the policy level.** Working with the local and national governments is crucial. Experience from A Good Start highlights that partnerships with the local and national governments and public institutions are essential to implement and sustain the project. (These partnerships are fruitful for both parties. In many cases it turns out that professionals working on Roma issues are not aware of reality). For example AGS local implementation partners regularly attend governmental expert team meetings, where the concrete achievements, data, and field experience can efficiently influence the policy level. However, capacity and credibility are also important. It is of great value to be adaptable and flexible, too. Unfortunately, many things depend on the good will of individuals, so personal contacts and the social skills while maintaining the connections with partners can also be an important factor in successful project implementation.

– **Establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.** Clear and attainable objectives must be set if this process is to be successful and these objectives must be realistic in each case so as not to create false expectations. Also, mechanisms must be put in place to monitor the process. The actions or roles of each stakeholder must be adjusted and adapted as needed, and the results of the process must be evaluated often in an effort to identify and analyze the factors contributing to the success or failure of the process. In this process of incorporating Romani children into the school system, especially at the preschool level, simple enrolment or access to school is not enough for assessment purposes. While this indicator is significant, the key area of assessment is educational mainstreaming, meaning the internalization of school schedules, routines and rules, social interaction in the classroom, academic achievement, family-school relations, and the right to be different.

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