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Improving conditions for Roma in the Slovak education system: A prerequisite for education towards citizenship

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Introduction

Romanies are a specific pan-European minority not bound to any particular territory. The conflicts arising from the differing philosophies of the 'placed' European majority and 'unplaced' Roma minority are multifaceted, and proposals for resolution have been the subject of numerous open-ended discussions in Slovakia as well as in other European countries. The majority populations in most European states appear to have a rather blurred picture and knowledge of the internal structure and hierarchy of the Roma community, and thus are not always able to understand and accept the 'otherness' which results from the different thinking, culture and values of the Roma people.

The alarmingly low level of general education attained by most Roma people directly affects all of society, side effects including a high unemployment rate and consequent dependence on social welfare, increased crime and drug addiction, neglected hygiene and poor housing conditions (Vacek and Lasek, 2003; Portik, 2001; Hornak, 2001).

In Resolution 153/1991, the Slovak Government approved the *Principles of the Government Policy towards Roma Minority* that were subsequently implemented in various reports, including those from the Ministry of Education. Many projects were devised, the outcomes including textbooks and workbooks in the Roma language. But empirical research shows that the language barrier is neither the primary nor a key determinant of Roma pupils' underachievement (Valachova, *et al.,* 2002). Even in those communities in which the Slovak language is commonly spoken, the school careers of Roma children are not successful: many underachieve even in the first year, since most children do not attend pre-school education facilities and enter school without adequate training and preparation to adapt to the school environment (Petrasova, 2001).

One attempt to overcome these factors was the PHARE project *Better Condition for Roma Self-Realisation in the Education System – SK0002.01.* Implemented throughout Slovakia in January-November 2003, it had the following specific activities:

1. to build a comprehensive pre-school education system for Roma children and reinforce Roma mothers' involvement in the education process, supported by trained Roma assistants;
2. to foster the elementary education of Roma children from socially and linguistically disadvantaged environments by establishing preparatory / zero classes and intensive whole-day care and an alternative education system;
3. to develop a pilot project of vocational training for Roma children who have not completed compulsory education; and

4. to support the university preparation of teachers and prospective Roma teacher-assistants employed by schools with high number of Roma pupils, and to strengthen the capacities of relevant universities.

This paper presents the project's activities and analysis of the data obtained during this.

Relevant backgrounds

Cognitive and social differences have been the subject of many research projects carried out in Slovakia (Belasova, 2001; Hornak, 2001). The outcomes indicate that Romany children, unlike their non-Roma counterparts, enter compulsory education with deficiencies in cognitive as well as social maturity. These outcomes have been contested, but the objectives of the project were based on the following:

*   Roma children from areas with a high concentration of Roma people have neither a command of the Slovak language (the language of instruction) nor a sufficient alternative in their mother tongue, since the word-stock and language code of the Roma language is limited;

*   the traditional Roma neighbourhood creates for the child a less stimulating and often dysfunctional social environment that does not facilitate effective socialisation. Roma children need to acquire hygiene and working habits, knowledge and competences; recognise philosophical, ethical and aesthetic systems; and adopt appropriate forms of social behaviour corresponding with the norms imposed by the majority society (Vacek, Lasek, 2003);

*   because the process of physiological maturation is not conditioned by positive stimuli from the immediate environment, developmental changes resulting merely from internally 'programmed' ontogenesis mean that Roma children aged 6 to 7 do not have the desired level of motor abilities;

*   the Roma community perceives school as a repressive institution in which their children experience nothing but failure, difficulties, inferiority and the fear of contempt. What is valued in the environment of the Roma community (temperament, noisiness, freedom) is viewed as problematic behaviour in schools. The school curriculum (especially in the junior secondary stage) does not meet the practical needs of the Roma living outside the mainstream of society;

*   prejudice against Roma pupils from non-Roma peers, and *vice versa*, results in a lack of mutual contacts; and

*   Roma pupils in mixed classes are perceived as unattractive rather than chosen by other children as friends. They are more often accepted by non-conformist classmates, and match their behaviour: this leads to poor behaviour for which they are rebuked, and are thus rejected (Selina, 2001).

Methodology of the Zero class

The developmental and cognitive handicaps that Roma children face when entering the first class are difficult to compensate in the course of regular elementary education, and tend to intensify. One of the means proposed to eliminate academic underachievement of Romany pupils at the outset was to establish Zero classes. The idea was defined in 1992 (Macsejkova, 2000), but the necessary legislative measures outlined only the operational framework without developing the basic curricular documents and methodological and working materials for teachers and pupils. The government's initiative to set out basic principles for educational practice in Zero class began just before commencement of the implementation phase of the PHARE project in 2003.

The philosophy of Zero class stated in the project's terms of reference was:

- Zero class is an alternative form of educating children aged six who experience social and fostering handicaps
- it is devised for both Roma and non-Roma pupils
- children can be placed in Zero class after an examination of their abilities by a psychologist and with their parents' approval
- Zero classes are based on all-day educational care combined with acceleration programs and cognitive and non-cognitive training
- the process emphasises the educational development of:
  - communicative competence,
  - fine-motor and grapho-motor skills,
  - cognitive processes,
  - social and emotional maturity,
  - working habits and self-reliance,
  - mathematical concepts,
  - aesthetic motor performance,
  - acquisition of basic reading skills *(*recognising graphic forms of some letters).

The emphasis is on an individualised approach.

Problems and barriers

Parents' disapproval

In the majority of cases the establishment of Zero grades did not meet obstacles from the founders, but from the beneficiaries: in many instances Roma parents disapproved placing their children in Zero grade. Most parents preferred placing their children in special education facilities rather than enrolling them in the Zero class, with its possibilities of progressive integration into the regular vertical system of education.

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Teachers in the Zero grade.

Head teacher and school managers were uneasy about assigning teaching positions to newly-qualified teachers because of their lack of experience, so the majority of Zero class educators recruited were experienced teachers qualified in elementary education. However, this did not always prove successful. Senior teachers with years of practice seem to have been more rigid in dealing with pupils in their instructional techniques, and according to some research, the older generation of teachers (especially women with decades of experience) showed prejudice against Roma pupils, or reservations about working in classes with a large number of Roma.

Teacher's assistants

Assistants are a new addition to classroom practice, intended to be mediators and facilitators of instruction and information transfer. They are almost exclusively Roma in origin, usually a member of the local community, and mostly women aged 20-45. The minimum qualification is a completed secondary course of vocational training. Some assistants participated in various courses run by education centres and universities etc, while others had no specific training but relied on their personal skills. The assistant's job in Zero class is to mediate the linguistic and cultural gap.

Often the assistant does not possess the relevant theoretical curriculum knowledge necessary to explain it correctly to pupils, and they are deficient in pedagogical skills which would facilitate co-operation with the teacher and positively stimulate the classroom climate. Some of the assistants are able to counterbalance these deficiencies by correct and efficient exercising of their natural authority, but others, instead of acting as a teacher's aide, become just another 'child' in the class.

The Roma community's attitude toward school

Romanies stereotypically perceive schools as repressive institutions, an attitude which is enforced by their view of schools as useless institutions, as they still face difficulties in finding work. Despite recent measures taken by the government in relation to compulsory education (making social benefit payments conditional upon children's regular school attendance), which have resulted in reduced absenteeism by Romany pupils, these attitudes remains unchanged. The major barrier to the Zero class lies in the Roma community's negative attitudes towards school as an institution. Such a passive, almost apathetic, stance was particularly seen in segregated communities with low social and economical status.

Description and structure of the project activities

Preparatory stage of the project

In the preparatory stage the following activities were carried out:

The allocation of experts to the schools

> Each expert was assigned to three to four schools and stayed in touch with these schools during the whole implementation phase (February – November). Monitoring tools were developed for the project:
> * input monitoring tools (questionnaire, structured interview with teachers, and structured observation protocols) to obtain data on the educational reality in schools

- school attendance monitoring form
- monitoring form to record the participation of the parents in the educational process and the co-operation between family and school.

Implementation stage of the project

In this stage the follow was carried out:

1. Design of the structure/contents of working material for Zero class pupils and the methodological materials for teachers. The final materials produced were to offset the lack of similar methodologies in this field of education. The materials aimed at cognitive, affective and sensory-motor development and were designed to respect:
    - individual and age-related characteristics of pupils in the respective age groups
    - recent strategic documents in Slovak education
    - a personalised and humanistic philosophy of education

2. Organisation of out-of-school activities. During the project implementation phase the expert team organised extracurricular events in the project schools and Roma communities two or three times a week in order to:
    - improve the information available to parents on school educational activities
    - raise the level of parental participation in pupils' preparation for school
    - promote the positive values of the Roma culture (through the participation of artists of Roma ethnic origin)
    - train parents through informal activities.

3. After-school activities were actively promoted to get the participation of as many children and parents as possible. The outcome of this includes a methodological publication on organising extracurricular activities and cooperation between schools and Roma families.

4. Preparation and delivery of the training for teacher and Roma teacher assistant. The main objective of the training was to:
    - prepare teachers and assistants for the implementation of materials in the future educational process in Zero class
    - inform participants in detail about the legislative norms and curricular documents for work in Zero classes

- inform participants about the specifications of the educational process in Zero classes (daily routine, preferred forms of education, integration, etc).

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results

Monitoring of pupils' school attendance

In the period February – October the teachers in the project schools recorded pupils' school attendance, calculating average values for both excused and unexplained absences. The statistical processing and qualitative analysis of the data obtained showed that:

1. There were considerable differences between classes on the number of excused and unexcused absences.

2. Owing to the changes in legislation that allowed reduction in benefits paid to parents for unexcused absence of their children, the attendance of Roma pupils improved to a certain extent. However, it was found that attendance problems at some schools remained and there was a high number of unexcused missed classes. Such schools were classified as problematic: during the implementation period the research team focused on more intensive co-operation with teacher, principal, parents etc. in order to seek possible solutions to the problem.

3. The problematic schools showed unsatisfying levels of cooperation with families, resulting in unwillingness on the part of the parents to contact the school (see also below for the monitoring evaluation of family and school).

4. The data on pupils' attendance proved the stability of the nature of the analysed variables. However, in many cases a gradual decrease in the number of unexcused classes was recorded during the monitoring period.

5. In some schools the cooperation among the expert, the teacher, pupils' parents and the Roma community did not stimulate attendance. More intensive cooperation over a longer period of time, especially, in the case of problematic localities, is likely to be required to eliminate this negative phenomenon.

Monitoring of the parents' participation in the educational process and cooperation between family and school

A form was developed to record the level and type of parental contacts with the schools. The teachers recorded instances of cooperation between family and school, each month calculating average values for the particular types of contacts. The statistical processing and qualitative analysis of the data obtained showed:

1. No significant differences in the frequency of contacts overall in comparison with the February – April figures. The quality of cooperation demonstrates stability in time. Qualitative changes in the examined variables started to appear at the

beginning of May, the period of intensive organisation of extracurricular activities in the project schools.

2. There are differences in the quality of cooperation between parents and schools, depending on the type of location, the socio-economic status of the family etc.

3. Cooperation between family and school is problematic in some localities (Vrbnica and Hrčel). There is direct correlation between lack of parental cooperation with the school and the number of unexcused absences.

4. Data analysis provided some information on the most frequent types of contact, which was initiated most often by the teacher. New forms of contact recorded were:

- visit to a settlement
- phone contact
- contact through a Roma assistant
- contact during the morning when accompanying a child to school.

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