



EC Consultation on Education

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Reason for interest in school: Roma pupils' equal chances

Roma are Europe's largest minority; moreover, the birth rate among Roma is notably higher than for majority populations in many countries. In consequence, the proportion of Roma among children of school age is higher than among other age groups, and Roma will be an increasingly large percentage of Europe's labour force in the years to come. It is therefore essential that European schools address the systematic inequalities in education available to Roma. The 2007 series of reports **Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma (OSI Roma Education Reports)**¹ produced by the EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program (EUMAP) of the Open Society Institute reveal that Roma fare worse than their non-Roma peers according to all available education indicators. In the eight countries covered by the reports,² Roma children are shown to have lower pre-school attendance rates, higher drop-out rates from primary and secondary school, and limited advancement to higher education. The EUMAP reports identify a number of key factors as essential to supporting diversity in general, and in meeting the needs of Roma students in particular.

1. How can schools be organised in such a way as to provide all students with the full range of key competences?

The quality of education in regards to educational processes relates to classroom organisation, practices and teaching methods, in-service training of teachers, school management, as well as school culture and atmosphere. One important aspect of the educational process that was monitored in the OSI Roma Education Reports was school-community relations. How a school is managed, and operates, and its interaction with student bodies' communities, has proven to be as important in quality educational delivery as content and teaching methodology. Schools that are not responsive to the needs and specifics of Roma children and their parents not only alienate, but are also perceived as hostile environments.

School management in the context of quality education has become a key issue as educational systems generally move from highly centralised systems towards more decentralised ones. Schools which have historically been under the supervision of authorities now have new levels of freedom. They lack experience and practice, and often without support or guidance, may falter in these new circumstances. Schools need to be provided with opportunities to gain skills needed to create school-based plans which will review the curriculum and services available to the students, and provide in-service training to teachers which will make it easier for them to work effectively with Roma students.

¹ Available online at http://www.eumap.org/topics/minority/reports/roma_education/.

² Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia.



A good quality education relies on parents' involvement in everyday workings of the school, and too often the OSI Roma Education Reports have revealed that involvement of Roma parents into School Boards accounts only for parental representation at the school level, rather than real parental involvement in the school's life and in the teaching and learning process. Educators often view parents of minority children as uninterested or incapable, but often the real need is for schools to find ways of reaching out effectively to parents. Real engagement of parents into the school life can have an impact on students' interest in education, and consequently on their learning outcomes. To this end, schools should work closely with community groups to ensure that all efforts to improve education are coordinated and that the school is truly responsive to community needs and interests.

4. How can school systems best respond to the need to promote equity, to respond to cultural diversity and to reduce early school leaving?

The EUMAP reports highlight the importance of access to pre-school education for Roma children, an issue of great significance among children of immigrants as well. Access to quality pre-school education can make a significant difference in the school achievement of students throughout their school careers. Across the region, data indicate that only a tiny proportion of Roma children attend pre-school, compared to the children of the majority group. At the same time, in many countries, the number of places in pre-schools is reported to be inadequate to accommodate the actual population of pre-school-age children. In Bulgaria alone, it is estimated that 32,000 children of pre-school age cannot be served by the current number of pre-schools in that country. As the proportion of Roma children among young children is generally higher than the proportion of Roma in the general population, Roma are disproportionately affected by the shortage of places. Frequently it is the poorest or most isolated areas that have the fewest pre-schools, areas where Roma tend to be concentrated.

Grouping students by perceived ability into separate classrooms, sections, or even buildings altogether, is a widespread practice in the countries monitored that may produce negative consequences. Roma children may be particularly affected by this type of classroom organisation, as pupils from poor households and those from minority ethnic groups are more often placed in marginal schools and separate classrooms, are taught with a separate curriculum, and learn in an atmosphere that is often overly rigid and focused on discipline. The OSI supports the practice of, and advocates for, integrated and differentiated instruction, whereby all students participate together in the classroom and the teacher effectively and efficiently reaches all students in a heterogeneous environment, thus avoiding the issue of placement of students in separate, special or other classrooms. For the placement of children into the mainstream school classrooms at the beginning of the school year, school and classroom placements should take into account a child's socio-economic background, mother tongue, and academic skills, allowing for a combination of these to make up each classroom, and ensuring a balanced and diverse grouping of children.



5. If schools are to respond to each pupil's individual learning needs, what can be done as regards curricula, school organisation and the roles of teachers?

Schools, as well as educational content, need to be meaningful for all children. The OSI Roma Education Reports reveal that Roma may not be reflected in curricula, or may be reflected in a biased manner; Roma are often not provided with adequate language support to learn their own mother tongue, or in order to properly learn the majority languages in the countries in which they reside.

In order to serve today's diverse societies, curricula should support an educational process whereby students can accept – and embrace – differences between and within groups. Thus, curriculum relevance should be defined as being in accordance with local/community knowledge, and at the same time, with global knowledge. The relevance of curricula is of particular importance to children of minority groups and especially for Roma children, as historically, they have not been included in or reflected at all in curricula.³ Two main aspects of curricula are of particular importance for Roma: a bilingual curriculum and provisions for studying Roma language in school; and inclusion of Roma history and culture within the national curriculum. The OSI Roma Education Reports detail how the language barrier for Roma children can result in incorrect placement in a special school, or segregation in a Roma-only class. Access to a bilingual curriculum is especially important for the first years of schooling, pre-school and early primary grades, since in those years basic skills and abilities are more easily developed in the child's mother tongue.⁴ Inclusion of Roma identity and its discussion within the national curriculum enhances acceptance of diversity and recognises minorities on equal terms with their majority counterparts. Though efforts have been made towards increasing the available curricular material relating to Roma, current approaches seem to take too narrow a view and offer this to Roma only, overlooking the fact that the majority population must also be educated and have exposure to diversity, even more so than the minority groups. Diversity in curricula fosters multiculturalism. In today's vastly expanding and global world, exposure to such diversity is of added value for the children's future. Without taking these components into considerations, schools fail to serve as a force to promote integration, and instead increase Roma children's sense of marginalisation.

It is the Open Society Institute's belief that the way in which teaching is provided, as emphasized in the OSI Roma Education Reports, is also important for instilling a sense of lifelong learning in pupils. The majority of teachers across the countries covered in the OSI Roma Education Reports are still working in the old paradigm, that of frontal teaching with a passive learning style. Although official policy may require new practice,

³ According to international human rights law, curriculum content should reflect minority cultures. See UNESCO International Bureau of Education, "Capacity Building for Curriculum Development" available at <http://www.ibe.unesco.org> (accessed 16 November 2007).

⁴ Research shows that linguistic competence in the native language is of high importance for general language development of children and that good proficiency in a native language is a solid basis for achieving competence in a second language. Thomas and Collier (1997, 2002) in their studies of school effectiveness for language minority students documented that support of the first language explains the most variance in student achievement and is the most powerful influence on those students' long-term academic success.



it does not have a system or means to monitor or support its implementation. An outdated and limited view of teaching as presentation of knowledge no longer fits with the current knowledge of how and what students learn.⁵ In high-quality education, classroom organisation and pedagogy should be child-centred, rather than teacher-centred, and to the degree possible, account for differentiated instruction in order to build upon each individual child's strengths, rather than focusing on their deficits. Teachers should also incorporate knowledge of minority cultures and multicultural education, second language teaching methodology, parental involvement, school improvement, and education for social justice, which are essential for preparing teachers to work with Roma children in a diverse classroom.⁶ A systematic support and mentoring structure for teachers to succeed in using those methodologies, including critical thinking techniques, is needed to support the widespread use of truly child-centered alternative teaching.

Teachers' expectations and attitudes have also proven to be of considerable importance for student performance and for their school trajectory. Hundreds of experimental studies in the field of the sociology of education have proven that negative teachers' expectations result in poor school performance, and that pupils invested with positive expectations improve their academic performance.⁷ Furthermore, evidence also indicates that educator attitudes impact not only on children's learning outcomes, but also on issues that need to be addressed to promote desegregation.⁸ OSI practice and research have confirmed that high-quality education requires high academic expectations for all children.⁹ Just as it is important for the curriculum to reflect diversity in unbiased ways, so teachers need to be prepared to work with diverse groups of children, and to reflect upon their own biases and what they bring to the classroom when they teach those diverse children. Working with teachers and school administrators to partake in anti-bias training opportunities may help teachers realize the bias and low expectations that they bring to their classrooms. The quality of, and access to, pre-service and in-service training opportunities for teachers which offer techniques for working in diverse and multicultural settings is essential for making changes in the teaching/learning process. The inclusion of concepts of diversity, multiculturalism and how to approach this in teaching, in both forms of teacher education, is of utmost importance in preparing educational systems to effectively integrate Roma students.

OSI holds that if genuine efforts are made to reflect diversity and to include children in the schooling process, this will have an impact on supporting long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe.

⁵ UNICEF, "Defining Quality in Education", p. 15.

⁶ See Proactive Information Services, *REI Final Report*, Budapest: Education Support Program, 2006, available at <http://www.osi.hu/esp/rei>, and ESP, "Combating Educational Deprivation of Roma Children: A Policy Discussion Paper", Budapest: Education Support Program, 2003, available at http://www.soros.org/initiatives/esp/articles_publications/publications/depriv_20030407.

⁷ The first experimental study on teachers' biased expectations was conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson in 1968. Their study conclusively proved the effect of teachers' biased expectations on pupils' academic performance. This effect was called the Pygmalion effect. See R. Rosenthal and R. Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968.

⁸ See *REI Final Report*.

⁹ See *REI Final Report*, p. 6.