



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Education des enfants roms en Europe
Education of Roma children in Europe



COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Background Note

UNESCO/Council of Europe Expert Meeting

**Towards quality education for Roma children: transition from
early childhood to primary education**

UNESCO, 10-11 September 2007

Executive Summary

UNESCO (Division for the promotion of Basic Education) and the Council of Europe (Division for the European Dimension of Education) are jointly organizing an expert meeting “Towards quality education for Roma children: transition from early childhood to primary education”. The goal of the meeting is to **contribute to the inclusion of Roma children in basic education through improving their access to early childhood education and their transition to quality primary education.**

The meeting will have the following specific objectives:

- a. To share promising educational policies and practices on early childhood education and on transition from early childhood to primary education for Roma children.
- b. To identify areas of action for Roma children to improve their access to early childhood education and transition from early childhood to primary education.
- c. To foster partnerships in and among countries of the European region.

Key issues to be discussed

- **What policies to ensure early childhood education and effective transition to primary education for Roma children?**

Do existing policies adequately address these issues?

How to move from special schools towards mainstream education for Roma children?

What policies ensure the right to quality education for Roma children, and what requirements for implementing such policies?

- **What contents and practices to accompany these policies?**

What tools to develop for quality learning?

How to make the curriculum and staff training more relevant to Roma children?

What are the role of the teachers, mediators and inspectors at early childhood and primary levels?

- **What role for the family and the community?**

How to increase families’ and communities’ awareness on the importance of early childhood education?

How to establish and/or improve relationship between the school and the family/community?

How to reinforce the role of the community mediators?

The work to be undertaken during the meeting will serve as a basis for developing a set of guidelines for action for policy makers, teachers and community mediators in favour of increased access to early childhood education and smooth transition to primary education for Roma children, to be conducted after the meeting and distributed widely to relevant stakeholders.

I. Introduction

The present expert meeting is organized in the framework of the Council of Europe's project "The Education of Roma children in Europe", launched in 2003 in line with the Recommendation R(2000)4 on the education of Roma children with the aim of implementing the Recommendation and of providing the Council of Europe's member states with coherent and sustainable guiding principles and responses which could be developed to improve the educational situation of Roma.

This meeting is also conceived within the framework of UNESCO's activities related to the education of children in difficult circumstances and as a follow-up to the launching of the 2007 Education For All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report, entitled "Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)", which makes a compelling case for investing in ECCE, highlighting its multiple benefits to not only individual children but also their families and society at large.

II. Conventions and action framework

Governments and international organisations, such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe, have repeatedly stated and advocated for the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination and the promotion of equal access to education. The purpose of the Convention against Discrimination in Education, which was adopted by UNESCO in December 1960,¹ is not only the elimination of discrimination in Education, but also the adoption of measures aimed at promoting equality of opportunity and treatment in this field. Efforts are being made to implement the United Nations 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which calls upon state parties to guarantee the rights of all children to survival, development, protection and participation from the beginning of life.

In 2000, the Dakar Framework for Action on EFA, adopted by the international community at the World Education Forum, calls upon countries to pay urgent attention and take action toward achieving six EFA goals. The first goal is expansion and improvement of comprehensive ECCE, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. The second goal is ensuring access to free and compulsory primary education of quality to all children by 2015, especially girls, disadvantaged children and those belonging to ethnic minorities.

In 2007, the Ministers of Education from the 49 signatory states of the Council of Europe Cultural Convention met for the 22nd session of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education (Istanbul, 4-5 May 2007). The Ministers stressed the importance of a quality education for all children and recommended to the member states to continue

¹ The Convention defines 'Discrimination' to "includes any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which, being based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth, has the purpose of nullifying or impairing equality of treatment in education" (Article 1 of the Convention) .

and reinforce the work on the education of Roma children in view of their access to quality education.²

These conventions and action framework reflect research evidence demonstrating that participation in well-designed ECCE programmes significantly enhances children's physical well-being, cognitive skills and social and emotional development in their formative years. Adequate early care and learning opportunities serve to build a solid foundation for development, upon which better learning achievement, school completion and continuation of learning throughout life depend upon. Transition to primary education is enhanced by quality ECCE intervention, quality primary schools welcoming all children, and links forged at systemic and practice levels between the two sub-sectors.

Research also demonstrates that vulnerable and marginalized children benefit most from early childhood services, which contribute not only to their health, care, development and education, but also help promote the social inclusion and participation of their families. Increased attention is being paid to quality early childhood programmes as an effective means to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, disadvantage and marginalisation, to the importance of increased investment in early childhood and primary education, and to the need for proactive policies to include children currently excluded and/or marginalised in the education system and programmes.

III. Current situation and challenges

In response to the above conventions and action framework, numerous Member States, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, have prepared and adopted national strategies to improve the situation of Roma populations in recent years, as mentioned in the Council of Europe report "Political and Legislative Framework for the Education of Roma Children : Reference Texts and Support Systems" between the years of 1999 and 2005. In these national initiatives, some more specific than others, education is always an area of major concern. While there are similarities and differences in their approaches, it is very encouraging that the needs of Roma are starting to be addressed at the national level.

While positive actions exist in favour of better early childhood and primary education for disadvantaged children, including Roma children, there are not enough of them. Worldwide, inequality in access to basic education and to learning opportunities is widespread and 77 million of primary school- age children are still out of school worldwide. With regard to enrolment in pre-primary education, while it has improved in a number of countries,³ many children are denied access to quality early childhood programmes and suffer from inadequate nutrition and lack the stimulation they need for normal growth and development. Even when they participate in early childhood education, disadvantaged children often do not receive the full range of child development, health and family services that are needed to optimise their learning.⁴

² Resolution on the 2008-2010 programme of activities (MED-22-9 final)

³ For example, 13% increase in GER in pre-primary education between 1999 and 2004 in Central and Eastern Europe GMR Regional Overview, UNESCO 2007.

⁴ Starting Strong II, OECD 2006.

Despite the efforts to expand and improve education for Roma children, with few exceptions, as much as 50 percent of Roma children in Europe fail to complete primary education; in certain countries of Central and Eastern Europe, between 50-80% Roma children enrolled in school are systematically routed into “special schools” which were established in the 1950s and 1960s for children with learning disabilities⁵. The enrolment rates for Roma in early childhood education are very low: for example, in Bulgaria and Romania where three quarters of children participate in preschool education, only 16% and 17% respectively of Roma children are enrolled in this level of education.⁶

Thus, efforts must be made to improve access such that Roma children have equal opportunities to attend quality ECCE services regardless of family background, socio-economic disadvantage, or other ethnic, cultural or linguistic factors. Special attention must be given to address issues of prejudice and discrimination in and out of school, and acknowledge the multiple identities of Roma children and their families in poor or geographically isolated communities.⁷ When well designed, early childhood programmes can provide Roma and non-Roma children with an opportunity to learn about and appreciate different cultures and benefit from inclusive and intercultural learning.

Such efforts will help laying a strong basis for further learning and development and will guarantee a smooth transition to primary schools. Meanwhile, these primary schools must be ready to welcome and accompany them through the course of their schooling. Access to, and retention and completion in primary schools for Roma children is facilitated by an education that is inclusive of human rights principles and value,⁸ such as no-discrimination, intercultural education,⁹ non violence, peace and tolerance. An education system conceived to ensure coherence and continuity of learning experience and approaches from early childhood to primary schooling is most beneficial for children and their families.

III. Joint initiative

The integration of marginalised and excluded children, including Roma children, in the mainstream education system is a general objective of both UNESCO and Council of Europe as well as for various governments¹⁰. Currently, the majority of Roma children are still assigned to special schools, which may be of low quality. Revamped efforts are therefore needed at the policy and practice levels to render mainstream schools and early

⁵ “Political and Legislative Framework for the Education of Roma Children : Reference Texts and Support Systems”, Council of Europe, 2006

⁶ UNICEF. 2007. Breaking the Cycle of Exclusion: Roma Children in South-East Europe. UNICEF Serbia.

⁷ Ibid. and Council of Europe Final Declaration of the 22nd Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education, Istanbul, 4-5 May 2007.

⁸ World Programme for Human Rights Education, Plan of Action, First Phase, UNESCO, OHCHR, 2006

⁹ See UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education

¹⁰ “Political and Legislative Framework for the Education of Roma Children : Reference Texts and Support Systems”, Council of Europe, 2006

education programmes inclusive so that Roma children can enjoy participating in learning with non-Roma children from preschool age.

The present expert meeting will give an opportunity to take stock of the existing policies and programmes and to highlight inspiring practices. It will identify key issues and lay the groundwork for developing a set of guidelines for action for policy makers, teachers and community mediators. It will also lead to several recommendations to be discussed by the Steering Committee of Education of the Council of Europe in order to overcome the pervasive and various forms of discrimination encountered by Roma children when enrolling in early childhood services and schools and to provide a favourable and positive environment in which Roma children can learn and feel comfortable.

The follow up to the expert meeting will be organised at the invitation of the Ministry of Education and Sport of Slovenia in 2008.