# Education
# of Roma children
# in Europe

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

*Report UNESCO and COUNCIL OF EUROPE*
*Expert Meeting*

UNESCO

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

COUNCIL     CONSEIL
OF EUROPE   DE L'EUROPE

# UNESCO and COUNCIL OF EUROPE


## Expert Meeting


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


## FINAL REPORT

# Expert Meeting

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

**UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, 10th - 11th September 2007**

**UNESCO**
**Division for the Promotion of Basic Education**
**Education Sector**

**COUNCIL OF EUROPE**
**Education of Roma Children in Europe**
**Division for the European Dimension of Education**

**Table of Contents**

5

## I.    BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

UNESCO and the COUNCIL OF EUROPE jointly held an expert meeting entitled "Towards quality education for Roma children: transition from early childhood to primary education". The goal of the meeting was to contribute to the inclusion of Roma children in basic education through improving their access to early childhood educational opportunities and their transition to quality primary education.

The meeting was held in order to find solutions to the educational problems met by the Roma community. It was 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, 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. Further, the meeting was organised in the framework of the Council of Europe's project "The Education of Roma children in Europe", launched in 2003 with the aim 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.

The meeting brought together a wide spectrum of international professional expertise on the subject. National delegations consisted of representatives of the Roma communities (Roma professional organisations), policy makers (Ministries of Education) and teachers (professional educational experts). The presentations within the meeting provided an effective combination of both Roma community expertise and educational expertise.

The meeting had the following specific objectives:

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

Hence, key issues included:

- The identification of policies necessary to ensure access to good quality early childhood education and subsequent transfer to good quality primary education;
- The content and character of such policies;
- The role to be played by Roma families and communities.

## II.     FRAMEWORK AND CONTEXT

Inequality in access to quality basic education is widespread; worldwide, 72 million of primary school-age children are still out of school and many pupils leave schools without acquiring essential skills and knowledge. 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. With regard to enrolment in pre-primary education, while it has improved in a number of countries,[1] many children are denied access to quality early childhood programmes. Hence, they lack from the stimulation they need for normal growth and development. Even when participating 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.[2]

Despite the efforts to expand and improve education for Roma children, 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% and 80% of Roma children enrolled in school are systematically routed into "special schools" established in the 1950s and 1960s for children with learning disabilities.[3] 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.[4]

Giving all children equal opportunities to quality pre-primary education is a joint initiative of governments and international bodies. Since the World Education Forum, held in Dakar in 2000, [5] the international community is committed to taking urgent action toward achieving six EFA goals. The first goal is expansion and improvement of comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Education (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 (particularly girls, children un difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities)  by 2015. 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. In the view of quality education for all children, member states were recommended to reinforce their efforts on the education of Roma children.[6]

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 UNESCO's Convention against

---

[1] For example, 13% increase in GER in pre-primary education between 1999 and 2004 in Central and Eastern Europe. EFA Global Monitoring Report, Regional Overview, UNESCO 2007.
[2] Starting Strong II, OECD 2006.
[3] "Political and Legislative Framework for the Education of Roma Children : Reference Texts and Support Systems", Council of Europe, 2006.
[4] UNICEF. 2007. Breaking the Cycle of Exclusion: Roma Children in South-East Europe. UNICEF Serbia.
[5] The World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal, 26-28 April 2000 adopted the "Dakar Framework for Action. Education for All: Meeting our collective commitments", where participants collectively committed the world community to achieving education for 'every citizen in every society'.
[6] Resolution on the 2008-2010 programme of activities (MED-22-9 final).

Discrimination in Education,[7] 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. Within the implementation of the United Nations 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, efforts are being made in guaranteeing the rights of each child to survival, development, protection and participation from the beginning of life.

Participation in well-designed ECCE programmes significantly enhances children's physical well-being, cognitive skills and social and emotional development in their formative years. They lay a basis for better learning achievement, school completion and lifelong learning. 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. As ECCE services promote social inclusion and participation, vulnerable and marginalized children are the ones who benefit most them. On a long perspective, ECCE can also be an effective means to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

The integration of marginalised and excluded children, including Roma children, in the mainstream education system is a general objective of both UNESCO and the Council of Europe as well as for various governments.[8] 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 education programmes inclusive so that Roma children can enjoy participating in learning with non-Roma children from preschool age.

In response to international legislation, numerous States have in recent years adopted national strategies to improve the educational possibilities of Roma children, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.[9] Continued 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 and or segregated communities.[10] 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.

Access to, and retention and completion in primary schools for Roma children is facilitated by an education embodying human rights principles and value,[11] such as non-

---

[7] 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, ahs the purpose of nullifying or impairing equality of treatment in education " (Article 1 of the Convention).

[8] "Political and Legislative Framework for the Education of Roma Children : Reference Texts and Support Systems", Council of Europe, 2006.

[9] This is mentioned in the Council of Europe report "Political and Legislative Framework for the Education of Roma Children : Reference Texts and Support Systems".

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

[11] World Programme for Human Rights Education, Plan of Action, First Phase, UNESCO, OHCHR, 2006

discrimination, intercultural education,[12] 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.

The expert meeting has provided an opportunity to take stock of the existing policies and programmes and to highlight inspiring practices. It has identified key issues and laid the groundwork for developing a set of guidelines for action for policy makers, teachers and community mediators. It has also led to several important 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 held in September in Paris will be organised at the invitation of the Ministry of Education and Sport of Slovenia in 2008.

---

[12] See UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education.

## III.    OPENING STATEMENTS

**Chairperson**

The Chairperson drew attention to the crucial importance of quality education for Roma children.. A key word in guaranteeing quality education is 'transition'; transition from one political regime to another; transition from one educational cycle to another and finally transition from one educational environment to another. The meeting would put an emphasis on early childhood education, defined as any educational provision outside the home for children in the age range 0 to 7 years.

The Chairperson reminded participants that the meeting provided a unique opportunity to share experiences, to assess and measure the current nature and levels of policy and provision respectively in the interests of identifying new fields of action. The meeting had the important objective to subsequently produce pan-European guidelines on Early Childhood Education that will be jointly published by UNESCO and the Council of Europe.

Finally, he commended the opportunities offered by the occasion for renewing and creating new partnerships leading hopefully to effective collaboration between the experts, civil society representatives and those from the respective Ministries of Education.

**UNESCO**

The UNESCO Deputy Assistant Director-General for Education, Ana Luiza Machado (Programme Management) opened by commenting on the value of the joint action by UNESCO and the Council of Europe and the great synergy that can be exploited in this partnership for changing the status of education for Roma children. The meeting was to recall the importance to reach the EFA Goals by 2015**.** Given the situation of 72 million children in the world still with no access to formal school education, efforts of inclusive ECCE have to be renewed.

All the key players need to have concerns regarding issues of quality and equity. Focus is required in many areas including the children not in school, those with restricted access to school and those with only access to bad school conditions. The reasons for the problems are complex but attention needs to be focused on demographic, geographic and gender issues. Roma children need to be given the opportunities through education to allow them to become active participants in society. In recording the stark statistical evidence of only approximately 17% of Roma children having access to education, and the placement of many of these in special schools, it is clear that enormous efforts are urgently required to change this situation and to guarantee their inclusion in the regular school system and their social and emotional development.

**Council of Europe**

The opening session was concluded with a statement from the Council of Europe General Director of the Directorate of Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport, Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni. She recalled that education has to be free and compulsory in order to

guarantee the full development of children. Parental choice is an important right of parents everywhere. Precariousness, exclusion and discrimination are all terms that we need to work against. Relationships between minorities and majority societies have to change and improve. She was pleased to be able to say that this joint UNESCO and Council of Europe meeting showed the beginning of the *mise en oeuvre* of these changes.

Finally, she reminded the meeting of the fact that 50% of Roma pupils do not complete their primary education; in order for this situation to change, particular attention must be paid to questions of prejudice and discrimination. All children need education that is characterised by its interactive and intercultural practice and new innovative approaches need to be developed, as for example, distance learning for children living in nomadic families.

## IV. SESSION 1: OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION AND MAIN CHALLENGES

**Keynote Presentations**

**(i) Introduction to Policy Issues in Early Childhood Education: inclusion, equity and diversity** *John Bennett*

> "Programmes of early childhood education need to take into account issues of diversity and encourage social mixing with 'majority' children."

The presentation focused on three central questions to be addressed in the provision of quality early childhood education:

1. **Why** invest in early childhood education, in particular for disadvantaged and Roma children?
2. **What** features of early childhood programming help to improve acceptance and increase access?
3. **How** to achieve access and quality in services for diverse groups?

In response to the first question, Bennett explored the importance of early childhood education being seen as starting at birth and being the foundation stage of lifelong learning. Research evidence confirms this assessment in terms of brain development. Cognitive, social and emotional well-being of all children, and their long-term success in school and life, depends on the experience of quality early childhood education. The experience of such provision acts as an antidote to the negative impact of disadvantage.

Research carried out globally, such as the OECD report "Starting Strong"[13] and the UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report[14] point to the unquestioned importance of intensive early childhood educational intervention as the most effective vehicle for securing sustainable educational success and for eroding the disadvantages of poverty, marginalisation and the impact of parents' with poor educational backgrounds.

All European citizens need to be included in their country's economy and society. However, as Bennett stated, from many perspectives Roma children should have a first call on services. Reference was made to the clear prescriptions for governments of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the specific mention of the need to pay particular attention to the needs of vulnerable children and those at risk of discrimination.[15]

In dealing with the second question posed in his presentation, Bennett described the features of early childhood programmes that most effectively lead to improved acceptance and increased access. Contextual difficulties and tensions need to be recognised. Prejudice and inequality are difficult to overcome and this is especially so if the group is also excluded

---

[13] Starting Strong, OECD 2006.
[14] EFA Global Monitoring Report UNESCO 2006.
[15] The Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No.7 (V.23.p.11 CRC/C7GC/7/Rev).

from the main economy of a society. In relation to acceptance of provision by the client groups, it was important to appreciate the long history of oppression of Roma communities and the culturally defined uncertainties in relation to choice and decisions pertinent to the cultural persistence of the group. Roma dependency on, and mistrust of, mainstream society and its institutions, would be a reality for any group subject to a history of racial prejudice, economic segregation, exclusion and extreme poverty.

The speaker insisted that early childhood learning programmes needed to take place within a general framework of social inclusion, employment and community development policies. The multi-dimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion needs multi-dimensional policy responses. Early childhood educational programmes cannot alone address the issues of poverty and institutional discrimination. As Bennet states, "poverty and prejudice need to be tackled upstream by government". Lastly, early childhood programmes need to be comprehensive and include health screening and nutritional inputs and be integrated with other community services while contributing to community capacity building. Evidence from the USA demonstrates a close correlation between access to pre-kindergarten education and family income. The higher the income of the family, the greater will be the level of access.

Assessments need to be made in relation to the barriers and environmental constraints that prevent access to services by low income families. There is also a need to 'deculturalise' perceived negative aspects of group behaviour and to 'culturalise' outcomes. Provision needs to be compatible with ethnic and cultural diversity within the wider community and institutional settings thus need to be welcoming and affirmative to all. This process of responsive provision places an onus on policy makers to listen to all parents and for structures to facilitate this reality in policy design.

In addressing his third question, Bennett identified the requirements for achieving quality in services for diverse groups. His general prescription centred on ensuring an early start; setting appropriate standards; and provide when necessary, expanded programmes. In addition to an early start, programmes need to be based on a comprehensive research of local needs; sound pedagogy integrating care, upbringing and learning; proper finance (including the potential for health screening and nutritional inputs); and conducted by appropriately trained professionals.

In relation to the financial context of policy and provision it was stated that disadvantaged and Roma children need superior funding programmes. If disadvantage is to be overcome in the interests of equality of opportunity, then provision needs to offer free access, the best teachers, more enriched environments, superior pedagogy, and smaller child/staff ratios. Inequalities of access need to be addressed.

Programmes of early childhood education need to take into account issues of diversity and encourage social mixing with 'majority' children. Social and cultural integration benefits all children both from minority and majority communities. Diversified educational settings allows for bridge building and the promotion of community cohesion. In addition, a quality curriculum will be one that celebrates and respects diversity. Narrow or absolute standards that all children should achieve are to be avoided.

The presentation ended with a set of key recommendations:

> ➢ Invest strongly to reduce child and group poverty.
> ➢ Increase significantly funding for programmes catering for children at risk.
> ➢ Identify real barriers to access for mothers from excluded groups.
> ➢ Set feasible targets for the access of disadvantaged groups.
> ➢ Design alternative curricular based on diversity pedagogy and the presence of varied learning capacities.
> ➢ Train staff in outreach approaches to parents, communities and diversity groups.
> ➢ Study examples of proven policy for parent and community involvement.

**(ii) Challenges in promoting access to early childhood education and transition to primary education for Roma children**
*Hristo Kyuchukov*

"In most European countries the legislative context provides, in theory, access for Roma children to pre-school education. However, the real situation is very different."

Kyuchukov opened by describing a number of strengths in traditional Roma communities, which are a benefit to young children and, hence, provide counter evidence to any prejudicial views held by policy makers towards Roma culture and socialisation processes. Reference was given to his own research on the 'Theory of Mind' and other research findings that demonstrate the positive impact of the extended family on child development. The raising of children is seen as the responsibility of the whole community; children should be treated with adult respect at an early age. In this secure social context young children are able to absorb oral history and Roma folklore.

Many Roma children are multilingual, which is known to be very beneficial in terms of their eventual intellectual development. Because of the linguistic and cultural strengths within the Roma family and community, most young children can narrate a story and understand riddles, teasing and jokes, on the basis of an expanding lexicon and ability to formulate complex sentences. Kyuchukov made references to research which confirms the importance of mother tongue, i.e., first language, for cognitive development and the educational advantages over monolingual children. The inclusion of the home language in developmentally appropriate early childhood settings is beneficial to young children's growth and development.

In most European countries the legislative context provides, in theory, access for Roma children to pre-school education. However, the real situation is very different. Real access is restricted on account of unemployment and family poverty; geographic isolation; unwelcoming and unattractive school environments; and cultural factors which include parents seeing the family and the home as the most appropriate place for early childhood education.

14

Kyuchukov defined the character of quality early childhood educational provision for Roma children with reference to the EFA Global Monitoring Report. Quality provision for Roma children depends in large measure on the nature and quality of teacher training; appropriate pedagogical approaches both inside and outside of the classroom; the affirmative inclusion of the children's cultural backgrounds in the curriculum and in the teaching and learning materials; and the use and place of mother tongue in the learning environment.

Two relevant case studies were then used to illustrate the significant differences in educational attainment for Roma pupils. These pupils have benefited from good quality education characterised by interactive and cooperative learning methodology and a curriculum inclusive of Roma culture, history and folklore. Roma teachers have been acting as positive role models for Roma pupils; teacher assistants have been working in the classroom and supporting Romani language development and bilingual learning. Also, Roma parents have been involved in school activities in a way that manifests a close relationship between pre-school, primary school and family. The second research study also concluded that bilingual learning advances skills in both languages. However, despite differential rates of learning in terms of grammar and language structures, the eventual attainment of the pupils is higher.

In implementing the research findings into policy and practice, there is a need for early childhood education for Roma children to be child centred; children should be engaged with their own learning and discovery. It is also important for the child's culture and first language, together with the official language, to be used for the cogitative, creative and emotional development of the child. Such an approach acts against the negative impact of cultural assimilation. This is also avoided with an intercultural curriculum and the associated books and resources that go with that approach. The role of Roma teacher assistants can be instrumental in ensuring this successful approach. Finally, schools with strong connections with families and community are more likely to boost the self-esteem of both pupils and their parents and overall levels of academic attainment.

The keynote presentation concluded with a number of conclusions and recommendations:

> ➢ An urgent need for more research into the education of Roma children.
> ➢ The establishment of early childhood research centres attached to universities in countries with large Roma populations.
> ➢ A commitment for research findings to be implemented into national policies.
> ➢ Romani as a mother tongue should be used for bilingual and bicultural/intercultural education in early childhood to provide a bridge between languages and cultures.
> ➢ Roma teachers and teacher assistants should act as a link between pre-school and family.
> ➢ Romani bilingual books should be produced.
> ➢ Alternative models of early childhood education should be developed in schools as for example the Step-by-Step programmes.

15

**(iii) The situation of early childhood education and transition to primary education for Roma children in European countries**
*Arthur Ivatts*

> "Weaknesses in policy, provision and practice is not the responsibility of the Roma. They are not to blame!"

Prior to the present meeting in Paris, the Council and Europe commissioned an audit of the early childhood educational situation of Roma children in Europe.[16] Ivatt's presentation provided a summary of that audit report and was based on published materials by the international agencies and questionnaire returns from some of the ministries of education participating in the meeting.

The summary paper described the context of the situation. This included:

- Unquestioned international recognition of the importance of early childhood education for happy and successful adult lives.
- 'Perhaps' a majority of Roma transfer to poor quality primary schools and are ill prepared by their early childhood educational experiences.
- Weaknesses in policy, provision and practice is not the responsibility of the Roma. They are not to blame!
- Roma community educational profiles reveal in general a stark contrast in educational fortunes.

*Data*
Data was identified as a key issue for the collection of evidence for monitoring race equality in education. Despite the efforts of the international players, there is generally a paucity of sound and reliable data for Roma pre-school 'engagement'. There is also mostly a universal lack of ethnically disaggregated data on Roma access, enrolment, attendance and attainment. The thinness of systematic data collection in this regard makes a meaningful audit of race equality virtually impossible.

*Access and Attendance*
The audit included an assessment of the evidence in regard to issues of access and attendance. Over the last five years, there is evidence of improved access for Roma children to early childhood educational opportunities. The catalysts to these improvements were said to include: well intentioned governments who want to make a real difference; actions by

---

[16] Council of Europe, "Towards quality education for Roma children: transition from early childhood to primary education" **,** Briefing paper for the Experts' UNESCO/Council of Europe Meeting

NGOs and the scrutiny of actions by international monitoring agencies; compliance to EU accession criteria; action plans linked to the Roma Decade of Inclusion; the Lisbon social inclusion agenda; and compliance with human rights and anti-discrimination laws and directives. In addition to the extension of rights to early childhood education, access as been improved as a result of the introduction of the compulsory 'pre-school' (or zero) school year. In some countries access has also been helped by the provision of free pre-schools and/or assistance to poor families. Despite the modest improvements in access, the data on actual enrolment and attendance is still too thin to be able to make an informed judgement.

The international source material, however, continues to identify many obstacles to accessing quality early childhood education and a seamless transfer to good primary education. Indeed, the evidence demonstrates that, despite the improvements referred to above, there are noticeable and significant differentials between Roma and majority populations. The obstacles identified for Roma communities include: poor communication between Roma and non-Roma homes and families; family poverty; lack of child or family documentation; shortage of school places; residential and institutional segregation; and 'exclusion' rooted in prejudice and discrimination.

*Attainment*
Most of the data on attainment comes from detailed reports of NGO and other projects but there is little systematic testing and monitoring. Hence, data collection is minimal. Much of the evidence demonstrates that Roma children achieve as well as any other group of children given quality provision and equity conditions.

*Quality Provision and Good Practice*
Descriptions of good practice are well documented in case studies within some of the international reports on actions and projects. However, a very variable picture emerges. Although there are many examples of good and promising practice in evidence, it tends to be fragmented and restricted in coverage. The best practice includes: outreach to families; multicultural learning resources; child-centred teaching and learning; parental involvement; Roma teachers and or teaching assistants; quality and well-resourced learning environments; and respect for ethnic and cultural diversity and bilingual support.

However, the evidence also identified persistent hindrances to the implementation of good practice. These included: lack of parental involvement of parents on account of the exclusive nature of many schools; restricted access to quality language and bilingual (Romani language) support; Roma cultural invisibility; distortions of knowledge about Roma; differential experiences of impoverished learning environments; low teacher expectations; general lack of child-centred interactive teaching approaches; and weaknesses in race equality audits by school inspectors.

In conclusion, Ivatts presented some recommendations:

> ➤ Continuing need for urgent action by governments.
> ➤ Continuing need for supporting and 'encouraging' actions by the international agencies.

> ➤ Vital importance of systematic data collection to measure policy outcomes and assessment of race equality.
> ➤ Need for community empowerment and capacity building.
> ➤ Need for more common agreements on 'quality' and 'standards' in early childhood education.

## DISCUSSION

In the ensuing discussion, a number of issues were raised. An initial comment focused on the barriers faced by Roma children in school on account of few teachers knowing the language and appreciating the important of first language support to the successful acquisition of second and subsequent languages. There was discussion on the growing tensions between Roma and majority populations in many countries in Europe, which was seen as an impediment for organising sound educational policies to include Roma in education. UNESCO was encouraged to envisage a systematic international action programme for Roma educational inclusion. The extent of Roma participation in the meeting and its preparation was something that worried a number of delegates. Roma expertise was not being used sufficiently to inform sound educational policies. Little appears to be done to ensure that there is a greater degree of international representation for Roma in the decision making councils of Europe. A further comment referred to the value of countries meeting together more frequently in order to exchange ideas and experiences and this process always leads to fruitful outcomes as exampled by this meeting itself.

A good deal of concern was expressed surrounding the common experience of Roma parents and children in terms of the unwelcoming ethos of many schools and the impoverished learning environments offered. There is a need for real and marked change in this aspect of quality provision especially in early childhood educational settings. Initial and in-service teacher training came in for much negative comment in terms of the gaps in teachers' knowledge and understanding of Roma cultural heritage, history and language. Schools which practice and deliver a mono-cultural non-Roma curriculum betray policies of social exclusion; these experiences are damaging and alienating to Roma communities and other minorities. Although national laws generally exist on issues of educational access and entitlement, the key problem was one of efficient and effective implementation by national and local governments. Sadly, the political will is frequently lacking.

# V.     SESSION 2: SHARING OF PROMISING POLICIES AND PRACTICES

**Panel 1: National policies and programmes favouring access to early childhood education and smooth transition to primary education for Roma children.**
*Moderator: Alexander Marc*

**Presentations:**

**(i) Norway, Tone Skodvin**

> **"**It is crucial that the whole Roma community, including children themselves, is given the chance to participate in decisions concerning their educational opportunities."

Skodvin opened by describing the Roma minority in Norway. Oslo's Roma population in Oslo is relatively small and marginalised, numbering some 420 in total; there were said to be only some 150 Roma children and young people between the ages of 6 and 19. In 1983, the Norwegian authorities established a formal institution known as the 'Gypsy Office', which initiated policies for the small Roma population until 1991. By 1993, it was expected that Roma children would enrol at and attend mainstream schools. The Office set up separate Roma classes and job training courses together with payments to families for attendance. Despite these considerable efforts being taken over a number of years to improve the access and attendance of Roma children in school, the results were very modest, with a continuing pattern of poor attendance and premature dropout from the 6th grade for a majority of the children concerned. Over the same period, as Skodvin pointed out, only one Roma girl pupil stayed in school to the end of her elementary education. At the time of the meeting, there were 65 Roma children on the rolls of schools in Oslo. Poverty has been a complicating issue for many Roma families, including anti-social behaviour, as well as difficult housing circumstances and poor health. This has frequently militated against regular school attendance.

Since 2005, there have been renewed efforts to improve the situation. Among other initiatives, the educational authorities have been holding extensive dialogue with Roma NGOs. It is clear that a long term educational plan is needed to have a more dramatic impact on the situation. In this context, listening to the ideas and expectations of the NGO sector is important. Older community members are said to regret the deficiencies in their own education and have expressed a desire for an improvement to their own literacy skills. An adult education centre has now been established to facilitate this and other educational and community functions. Additional funding is being provided to schools where Roma pupils are enrolled, so that they can receive the attention they need to get basic literacy and to stay on at school. As Skodvin pointed out, there is now a genuine desire in Norway to undo the mistakes in past policies and move rapidly towards a situation characterised by mutual understanding and respect. To ameliorate the situation in the future, Skodvin brought forward two key priorities: participation and literacy. It is crucial that the whole Roma community, including children themselves, is given the chance to participate in decisions concerning their educational opportunities. This could lead to an improvement in levels of literacy. If the Roma feel that they have a say in educational questions, it is thought to be

19

more likely that they will stay in the school system long enough to receive a good basis in literacy. These points have been stressed by project leaders.

In the school environment, the role of the teachers and principals is very important. Also, in the area of Roma education, cooperation with all the parties concerned is crucial. The need for mutual understanding is urgent. The school administration should meet Roma children and their culture with openness of mind and without prejudice. Further, poor school achievements are related to poverty and poor housing conditions, which are often the harsh realities for Roma communities. Hence, the financial need is strong for projects to alleviate these poor conditions of the Roma, in order to help them succeed in the school environment.

**(ii) Hungary, Szilvia Pallaghy Hegyine**

> "Although Hungary has a history of successful integration of minorities, the Roma community as a whole still await successful and realistic integration within the system."

Roma are Hungary's largest minority ethnic community; it is estimated to be between 800,000 and one million. There is clearly discrimination in the education system against Roma. In 2000, an estimated 80% of Roma pupils were in separate schools. In 2002, the Ministry of Education appointed a Roma person to coordinate the efforts being taken to improve the situation, including serious attempts at desegregation, and a programme of investment in Roma education was initiated and based on the terms of the Public Education Act. Although pre-school education (3 years to 6) has been free since 1993, many Roma children are unable to attend on account of a shortage of kindergarten school places. More action is required in this direction.

According to Pallaghy Hegyine, Hungary is in a situation of transition when it comes to Roma educational programmes and policies. Although the country has a history of successful integration of minorities, the Roma community as a whole still awaits successful and realistic integration within the system which secures equal opportunities in education. In this regard, discrimination against, and segregation of Roma is still a central issue. Recent history has demonstrated the importance of financial programmes to target the education of Roma children. In this regard the Hungarian government has introduced a system of identifying multiple disadvantages such as parental illiteracy and poverty. Of those thus identified, 80% are Roma and the programme allows for financial support to be given to such families. These programmes have been successful and were commended to the meeting's participants. Linked to this policy, and again based on the Public Education Act of 2005, pre-schools are obliged to accept multiply disadvantaged children. This has been an important step in the right direction of securing greater access for Roma children to early childhood educational opportunities, although their acceptance depends on the availability of a school place. Local governments need to place a higher priority on the provision of the additional school places needed. There is also a need for local projects and provisions to work effectively.

**(iii) Slovak Republic, Dagmar Kopcanova**

> "When it comes to the education of Roma children in the Slovak Republic, the last decade has been influenced by trying to integrate Roma children from special schools into mainstream schools."

Kopcanova opened with a description of the National Programme of Education in Slovakia which has been established under the UNESCO initiative on Education for All. Part three of the programme states that all underprivileged children, including Roma, should be assisted to receive education. In the Slovak Republic, however, it is difficult to address the Roma population as the population is not clearly defined; many Roma consider themselves to be Hungarian. Yet, an estimation of the Roma population within the country has been put at 380,000 people. In order to enhance the position of the Roma community, a Council of Experts on Roma issues has been established. It gathers representatives from all levels and diverse fields to discuss Roma issues.

As a member of the Council of Experts for the training and education of Roma people, the speaker laid out the frameworks of the Council. When it comes to the education of Roma children, the last decade has been influenced by trying to integrate Roma children from special schools into mainstream schools. The overall impact of these efforts of integration has been positive; Roma children have had better success at school, and dropout rates have decreased. The point was made that if there are concentrated efforts across a range of policies and practices, including curricular innovation and improvements to the quality of learning environments, then Roma children can achieve success in the school situation. In this regard, and in order to meet each child's personal needs, individual education plans are made. Other examples of good practice in Slovak schools are teacher in-service training; special assistants for Roma children; and practical books which offer help and guidance to schools in how to better understand the Roma culture. In enhancing the communication between Roma and majority populations, the education of parents is crucial, as is home-based education alongside schooling. Stress was laid on the importance of university level education for teachers including an informed awareness regarding minorities and in particular of Roma heritage, culture, history and language. All in all, good results can be reached by a comprehensive approach and networking between all the different actors.

In concluding, the challenges faced with regard to the education of Roma were outlined. The main challenge lies in providing equal access to quality education for all children, especially Roma. In this regard, UNESCO plays a crucial role.

Sidebar: Positive results can be reached. A UNESCO seminar in 2005, concentrating on Roma, had as an outcome a draft resolution which was handed to the UNESCO General Conference.

## DISCUSSION

The discussions focused on a number of issues which had been raised by the speakers. There was a general agreement that the disproportionate representation of Roma in special schools was totally unacceptable and that they should be integrated into mainstream schools

without further delay. Participants addressed the difficult issues associated with getting rid of the special schools. This led to considerations surrounding the cultural bias in the testing procedures of children which worked against Roma children, thus placing them in a disadvantaged position and justifying their erroneous placement in so-called 'special schools'. There was a need for both verbal and non-verbal tests so that children's first language should not be seen as a disadvantage. The whole process of testing children in this selective way was challenged as the negative results had a damaging and lasting impact on the life chances of far too many Roma children.

A view was expressed that there are too few people and international agencies, including UNESCO, working directly with Roma communities. The current meeting was seen as a step in the right direction; by bringing governments and civil society players together to share experience and to allow governments to be better informed on the realities for Roma communities.

Concern was also expressed in relation to the difficulties of implementing the many national strategy plans for Roma integration. They look good on paper, but there is a need for them to be efficiently and effectively implemented; this slow implementation is part of the current problem. Also, there is a need for an improvement in school-based evaluation procedures.


**Panel 2: Early childhood education practices from civil society and regional/national organisations favouring smooth transition to primary education for Roma children**
*Moderator: Colette Murray*

**(i) The Council of Europe teaching kit for Roma children in pre-primary education, Francois-Xavier Bernard**

> "The curriculum aim of the *"Mallette pédagogique"* is to allow the Roma child to discover the world around them, to promote language skills and to prepare a child for successful integration into school."

Bernard presented the Council of Europe teaching kit, *"Mallette pédagogique"*. Its objective is to help Roma and Traveller children gain access to and succeed at school, inter alia by targeting learning-related objectives with children and their parents:
1. developing the basic skills needed to start school
2. "learning to learn" and awakening children's "desire to learn"
3. educating parents about "learning".

It includes CDs, manuals, pedagogical fact sheets and other teaching and learning materials to be used as a pedagogical training tool; the teaching kit is easy to carry around, hence, simple to use by whomever. The kit is an alternative tool for learning: it can be used autonomously within the family or in other non-formal learning environments. The curriculum aim of the kit is to allow Roma children to discover the world around them, including the scientific world, within their own homes. It is also aimed to promote language skills and to prepare a child for successful integration into school at the right age.

22

Although the idea of the kit is to be self-standing, it contains some activity sheets which are better used with supervision by a mediator. Hence, the kit also includes a CD for trainers of the mediators who will be using the kit with Roma families. The kit has been well trailed with Roma children in Romania and France. Its successful usage was shown to meeting participants through two videos: the first one encourages grand-mothers to help their grand-children's learning processes; the other one concentrates on child-child cooperation and enhanced quality of learning.

Sidebar: The *"Mallette pédagogique" is disseminated in the 49 States signatory of the Council of Europe Cultural Convention*.

### (ii) Bilingual and intercultural kindergartens, Ioana Enache

> "The achievements of intercultural kindergartens have so far been impressive, with higher levels of pupil attainment, more successful transfer to primary schooling, and closer links between the teachers and the Roma families."

Enache opened with a comparative description of the inequalities for Roma in Romania. Stark statistics were given: while 2% of the Romanian population are not in school, 23% of Roma are in this situation with 28% not in primary education and 33% not in secondary education. At the other end of the educational spectrum, while for the majority society 15% transfer to universities, only 1% of the Roma are given this opportunity. With regard to pre-school education, only 20% of Roma pupils attend early childhood educational opportunities, with 66.1% for the majority population.

Details were also given in regard to the development of bilingual kindergartens established with the support of UNICEF. A number of international donors, including member states, were named as providing important programmes linked to bilingual support and intercultural kindergartens with an intercultural curriculum. Ten such kindergartens were being tested and evaluated during the current academic year. The first bilingual and intercultural kindergarten was opened in 2004; another school is to be opened shortly. One of the aims of the bilingual kindergartens is to teach Roma pupils the Romanian language through the medium of their first language. The aim is also to preserve the Romani language and affirm Roma identity and individual child self-esteem.

The value and educational importance of bilingual education was stressed and supported by extensive international research findings. The achievements so far have been impressive with higher levels of pupil attainment; more successful transfer to primary schooling; and closer links between the teachers and the Roma families with mothers and grandmothers visiting the schools and doing a range of cultural activities with the children including story telling. The programmes also celebrate cultural diversity and include Roma language and traditions. The project has been approved by the Ministry of Education and it is hoped that these kindergartens will be included in national public policy. In addition, the Roma Education Fund, has contributed significantly to a project on the training and employment

of Roma teaching assistants as part of capacity building and institutional development. Twenty four Roma teaching assistants have been trained and a majority of these are employed within kindergarten settings.

### (iii) Child-centred education, Comelia Cincilei

> "In Moldova, provisions for early childhood education are limited. Often, the Roma population does not even benefit from this modest level of provision."

Cincilei opened by stating that Moldova has less Roma segregation in education than most other countries in eastern and central Europe. She suggested that one reason for this feature of Moldovan society was the general socio-economic deprivation that the country suffers as a whole; Moldova is reported to be the poorest country in Europe with a majority of the population living in rural villages.

In terms of education, it was said that there is an urgent need for reforms across a wide spectrum of professional activity. New standards in teaching and learning are needed. There is very limited provision nationally for early childhood education in general in the country. And all too often, the Roma population does not even benefit from this modest level of provision.

The Step-by-Step organisation, which Cincilei represents, has been working to establish child centred education and in a recent development, 20 child and family community centres have been established. This is helping to make some much needed provision in isolated villages. In addition, 12 sets of thematic materials have been produced including one entitled "Preparing for school", and another pack of 'Training the Trainers' materials. The Step-by-Step organisation works closely with the Roma NGO sector but it is acknowledged that much needs to be done to improved the educational opportunities for Roma communities.

Sidebar: The Step-by-Step organisation has been working to establish child centred education. In a recent development, 20 child and family community centres have been established.

### (iv) Some good practices in South East Europe, Aleksander Turoman

> "The Roma are trapped in a vicious circle of extreme poverty, poor education, unemployment and marked social exclusion. This cycle is very difficult to break."

Turoman opened with a summary of the plight of Roma in South East Europe (SEE). Very few Roma have access to early childhood education: 0.2% in UNMIK/Kosovo, 3.9% in Serbia and only 12 actual children in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Roma are trapped in a vicious circle of extreme poverty, poor education, unemployment and marked social exclusion and with little interest by central government to ameliorate the situation. This

cycle is very difficult to break. The communities suffer from residential segregation. In education, they frequently experience segregation and discrimination by teachers in the schools. Only 20-30% of Roma children are included into mainstream schools and it was estimated that only about 10% of this cohort who complete primary education transfer to secondary education. Disproportionate numbers of Roma children are placed in special schools. The cost of education was said to be too much for many Roma parents, which naturally hinders access and attendance. The effects of violent interethnic conflicts in the 1990s, and the transition towards a free market economy and western-type democracy still effects the provision of education in SEE, in both terms of access and quality. These events resulted in extreme poverty and intensified discrimination of traditionally marginalised populations. The educational needs of the Roma communities are not fully known on account of a lack of official data.

In terms of quality, education systems are unable to recover to pre-conflict standards, or to respond to new social and economic realities. Aspiration to join the European Union has resulted in the initiation of a major reform process across SEE, including education. The implementation, however, lags due to lack of firm political commitment and a shortage of human and financial resources. Services usually ignore socially excluded populations. Systemic response is missing due to inflexibility of educational institutions and other stakeholders to reach out in provision of education to these children, and due to a lack of cooperation among various services. As a consequence, there are no systemic mechanisms for the identification of out-of-school children and children at risk from exclusion, which prevents planning of financial and other support needed for their inclusion in education, such as provision of free textbooks, meals, transport, and school supplies.

Despite these difficulties, the constructive crisis intervention and long term development work has been fruitful. Some of the good practice models that Save the Children UK promotes in SEE region in order to assure that Roma children have access to good quality pre-school and primary education:

- Development of models of good practice for inclusive education, including introducing the Index for Inclusion into schools and to other key stakeholders as well as working with Roma parents and communities directly.
- Supporting national governments to develop strategies for inclusive education and enabling legislation, including working to reduce reliance upon segregated education and or the use of 'special schools'.
- Capacity building of local partners, including working through local NGOs and with municipalities.
- Advocacy and public awareness rising.

Turoman described a model for community reconciliation through intercultural, bilingual pre-school education in Kosovo known as "Mosaic". The methodology not only teaches people to talk to each other, but to understand and appreciate each others' culture, and unique contribution to Kosovo's history and demographic make-up, encouraging mutual respect and appreciation. It uses a range of complementary approaches including community outreach activities; pedagogical approaches that promote child centred modern teaching and

learning styles; bilingual, multi-ethnic community-based approaches; and a management structure which insures the provision of technical expertise, advice, monitoring and strategies for sustainability.

Sidebar: The "Mosaic" model introduces age-appropriate training in conflict-resolution skills for children within the public kindergarten system and engages the entire community in the transformation process.

## DISCUSSION

The issues surrounding the use of the Council of Europe teaching kit stimulated a good deal of questions and discussion, including whether the kit should deal with a wider range of subjects in addition to only science. The general view, however, was that it was a valuable resource which had received much international interest. Discussion also focused on issues of diversity and the need for it to be inclusive of all human dimensions including gender (and sexual orientation), race/ethnicity, culture, religion and disability. The self esteem of children was seen as central to quality provision and necessary for happy and successful learning.

Questions and comments from the floor included issues surrounding the need for dissemination and sustainability of good practice work by the NGO sector. In response, the inter-cultural kindergartens in Romania provided a good example of what should happen with the adoption of the policy by the national authorities. It is hoped that it will become replicated across the country as a part of national policy. There was a question on who was mapping the geography of this mass of successful practice. UNESCO has a general policy to collect and disseminate good and successful practice and the joint action with the Council of Europe will enable many of these good projects to be mapped, recorded and taken forward in the follow-up planned.

## VI. SESSION 3: HOW TO MOVE FORWARD; IDENTIFYING AREAS OF ACTION

In the third session of the meeting, participants were divided into working groups in order to discuss the issue of quality education for Roma children and to identify future areas of action. All three groups focused on the following themes:

> Theme 1: Supporting the role of parents, community and mediators
> Theme 2: Improving the learning processes
> Theme 3: Reinforcing and implementing education policies in favour of Roma children

## INTRODUCTION TO WORKING GROUP THEMES

### Theme 1: Supporting the role of parents, the mediators and the community
*Mihaela Zatreanu*

Zatreanu opened by stressing that education and schooling are not the same. Schooling is an important part of the educational process for most children, but more is needed if one is to become an educated person. In order to achieve holistic education, many influences are necessary; central to these is the family. Parents as well as pupils are the schools' clients. There is a need for a strong partnership between schools and families; effective programmes, which engage families and community, need to embrace a philosophy of partnership.

- Why listen to parents' opinions?

  o No one knows children and young people better than their parents. The family is the sole element of continuity in most people's lives;
  o Children may behave differently within the family and at school;
  o Parents can have a considerable impact on children's learning and priorities;
  o Parents have both rights and responsibilities, including the right to be listened to regarding their children's education;
  o Schools need to know what parents think about the work they are doing and how their children are progressing at school.

- How can schools assist families in developing their capacity to support their children's education?

  o Engage them at school so they understand what their children are learning;
  o Give them a voice in what happens to their children;
  o Provide information about how to help their children at home, what their children need to learn;
  o Foster social connections among families and with teachers;
  o Build families' understanding of the education system and how to guide their children through it successfully;

- o Offer access to social services and community agencies;
- o Identify and build on strengths in the community and among families.


- Suggestions regarding the improvement of parental involvement:

  - o Make the parents feel more welcomed;
  - o Change the attitudes of school staff so that they recognise the advantages of teachers and parents working together;
  - o Consider the educational level, language and culture and home situation of parents;
  - o Give teachers time to plan and organise parent activities;
  - o Recognise that even if parents cannot be present at school, helping their children at home is also a valuable contribution.

- Guidance for the working group discussions:

  - o Recognise that all parents, regardless of income, education level, or cultural background, are involved in their children's learning and want their children to do well in school;
  - o Create programmes that will support families to guide their children's learning, from pre-school through to high school;
  - o Develop the capacity of school staff to work with families and community members;
  - o Link family and community engagement efforts to children's learning;
  - o Focus efforts to engage family and community members in developing trusting and respectful relationships;
  - o Embrace the philosophy of partnership and be willing to share power with families;
  - o Make sure that parents, school staff and community members understand that the responsibility for children's educational development is a collaborative enterprise;
  - o Build strong connections between schools and community organisations;
  - o Design and conduct research that is more rigorous and focused, and that uses more culturally sensitive and empowering definitions of parental involvement.


**Theme 2: Improving the learning processes**
*Alida Matkovic*

Matkovic opened by addressing the need for rising awareness among the general public on Roma educational and social issues; she stressed the importance of greater mutual understanding. Poor living circumstances for Roma families are often the reason for poor attendance and underachievement. Schools are disinclined to improve their provision when pupils do not attend regularly and parents seem to put little pressure on the schools to change and improve.

- Obstacles to improving the quality of the learning process for Roma children:

  o The lack of knowledge by head teachers and teachers about intercultural education and an unwillingness to implement such policies;
  o The lack in most education systems for professional support for schools;
  o The insufficient monitoring of policy implementation;
  o Poor teacher training and the lack of good and appropriate teaching materials.

- Working groups were encouraged to address especially the following matters:

  o The need for the school curriculum to be broad, intercultural and strongly in favour of diversity;
  o The need for the general teaching approach to be inclusive of all the children's backgrounds in the classroom or in the country;
  o The need for strengthening the collaboration between all the players including local authorities, civil society and the private sector;
  o The need for better coordination between central government ministries, particularly on the issues of education, social welfare and health;
  o The impact of the appointment and efficient deployment of mediators or teacher assistants when it comes to improving the learning process and particularly in relation of bilingual support;
  o The need for more research so that policy and professional practice can be better informed.

**Theme 3: Reinforcing and implementing educational policies in favour of Roma children**
*Tunde Kovacs*

Participants were reminded of the complex structure and interrelated components of effective policy design and implementation. Models of efficient education are not that common and policy implementation is a very lengthy process with many potential interruptions including a lack of funds; human resources; capacity; and institutional support. There is also ample room for conflicting and ill designed policies. The Roma Education Fund (REF), which Kovacs represents, has presented an audit of what is effective and what is less effective in terms of policy design and implementation. One key aspect is the establishment of well informed data bases including information on numbers, and on national education policies towards Roma communities. This background information allows for effective monitoring and evaluation and for comparative analysis.

- Policies designed to improve the education of Roma include:

  o The effective access to pre-schools;
  o Affirmative action;
  o Scholarship given to low-income families;
  o The teaching of Roma language, culture and history;

- o Roma assistants, mentors and mediators helping Roma students;
- o Catch-up classes for students with weak performance;
- o Free textbooks and meals.

- Mainstream educational reform policies beneficial to Roma includes:

  - o Abolishing/down-sizing special education;
  - o Introducing compulsory pre-school education;
  - o Modernising teacher education/training;
  - o Monitoring quality;
  - o New funding mechanisms for students.

- Policies within mainstream reform programme that pose a threat to Roma communities include:

  - o Competition among schools;
  - o Decentralisation of education;
  - o Early tracking of talented children;
  - o External school leaving examinations;
  - o Curriculum school based flexibility.

- In relation to policies to increase access to non-compulsory early childhood education for Roma, a range of actions were needed, including:

  - o Provision of education free of cost;
  - o Cooperation between government and civil society players;
  - o Civil society actions;
  - o Parental involvement;
  - o Affirmative action.

- Even in national contextual situations where pre-school attendance is compulsory, there are still a number of factors which hinder implementation. These were listed as such:

  - o No place in pre-school institution;
  - o No support mechanisms;
  - o Low quality in education;
  - o No inspection or monitoring;
  - o Segregated groups;
  - o Attendance not monitored;
  - o Lacking data collection;
  - o The issuing of certificates irrespective of actual attendance records.

- A number of problems in regard to early childhood education for Roma were detailed and these included:

  - o The fact that pre-school education systems are in a period of transition;

30

- o Roma families are vulnerable in the pre-school context as for many families this will be the first contact and involvement with the official system of education;
- o In most situations the Roma family ventures into the world of the school with no voice and little if any influence;
- o Pre-school provision is frequently seen as having a low status within educational structures.

- Lastly, the working groups were given guidance on what to discuss:

  - o How to overcome policy barriers;
  - o How to overcome the common pitfalls of policy implementation;
  - o How to overcome data and information barriers;
  - o How to avoid additional burdens for the children.

## OUTCOMES OF THE WORKING GROUPS

The discussion of the working groups reflected the complex nature of the quality education of Roma children, the effectiveness of early childhood education, and the smooth transition from pre-primary to primary education. Rapporteurs were Vincent Nara Ritz (Group1), Delia Grigore (Group 2), Beata  Olahova and Alida Matkovic (Group 3). The working groups made a number of concrete recommendations, within the three themes introduced, which can be framed within the following dimensions:

### *Theme 1: Supporting the role of parents, the mediators and the community*

A question central for education is: how does the child feel at school? This is crucial to ask regarding all children. The school environment should be made less dramatic for Roma children; there is a need to make them realize that the school is not a dangerous place. Hence, there is a strong call for a new strategy of information and for communication with parents of Roma children. Only by working together with different actors, including the members of the Roma community, there is an effective possibility to bring Roma children to mainstream schools together with other children.

The groups found it important to emphasize that the Roma culture is not a sub-culture but a culture equal to any other. Hence, comprehensive training of non-Roma teachers should take place, especially on how to deal with discrimination and bullying. In the education of Roma children, affirmative action is needed. Positive support should be given to those who need it, including Roma children.

**In supporting the role of parents, the following issues were emphasized:**

31

- Roma parents should be seen as partners of school; they should be taken into account in decision making and extracurricular tasks.
- The parents should not be seen as objects, but rather as subjects, within the educational system. Communication between Roma and non-Roma parents should be given support in order to enhance the intercultural understanding.
- Non-Roma parents should be educated about Roma history. Roma parents should be consulted as experts on Roma culture, in order to share this expertise with others.
- In policy making, parents should have an active role; they should be given the chance to participate in decision making and in the everyday life of the school. There should be more organizations functioning with and by Roma parents; for instance, Roma parents should be part of school councils and other decisional bodies.
- The best interest of the Roma child should always be taken into account. There should be mutual respect between the school and the parents: schools should respect the best interest of each child and its parents. National policies should be coherent with school policies, and parents should be included in policy making. To this end, diversity should be seen as an asset, not an obstacle, in the communication between schools and Roma parents.
- Schools should advocate change. Many Roma parents do not want their children to participate in schools because of too high costs and too large cultural differences. Hence, these parents should be confronted and they should be familiarized with the positive effects of education.
- Multicultural education is needed in order for schools to win the confidence of Roma parents. Also, Roma role models are crucial; Roma children need to have adult role models to look up to and learn from.
- In discussing teacher training, it was proposed that non-Roma teachers could visit Roma communities and observe their habits and way of living, in order to better understand Roma culture.
- As the family is at the centre of the child's life, communication between schools and Roma families is essential. Roma parents should visit schools regularly, especially when their children are on the level of preschool education, as this would build confidence towards the education system. To this end, Roma children could function as messengers to their parents about the positive impact of education.

**The role of the mediators:**

- Mediators have a strong role in supporting parents. Hence, there is an important triangle between the school, parents and mediators. In communicating with each other, all parties should accept diversity as something positive and enriching.
- The relationship between parents and mediators should be strengthened in the communication within schools.
- There should be a strong cooperation between schools, ministries and administration, and mediators could play a central role in bringing these actors together.

- Mediators are not always very welcome in schools. In future work, they should be given a larger impact on advocating the best interest and the rights of the child.

**Within the larger community, the groups felt there was a need for the following actions:**

- Higher awareness-raising on the issue of Roma culture, history and heritage.
- Larger acceptation of cultural differences between Roma and majority populations.
- Projects are needed both in class and outside; projects on multiple levels are recommended.
- There has to be a unifying system that brings together the different projects and their aims. As it is now, Roma projects have difficulties receiving funding because they are not coherent and there is no follow-up.
- Different partners are important; cooperation on the socio-political, educational, regional and municipal levels is crucial.
- Intervention and training on self-esteem should be included in the school curricula.
- Values such as mutual respect, human rights and anti-bias should be included in the communication with the Roma community.
- The terms of reference within the Council of Europe as well as country-based good practices should be mainstreamed; they should be shared with countries where policy is still weak or not in force.

*Theme 2: Improving the learning processes (content, tools, training, etc.)*

There are many factors to be considered in the improvement of Roma children's learning processes. Social conditions, which are often worse amongst Roma than within the majority population, are to be taken into account. It is important to share good practices, not only within a country but also between governments. Roma parents need financial assistance. To illustrate this, some successful examples on financing of Roma projects came up within the group. In Hungary, for instance, there is positive discrimination in favor of Roma children; in Cyprus, Roma families receive financial benefits. The following main points were made:

**School environment:**

- All groups found that the school environment is important: it has to be secure for Roma children. There has to be an implicit message saying that "my family is not strange even though we are different"; "I am not bizarre even though I do not speak the same language as the others".
- In the education of Roma children, information about the importance of education is essential. The objective of the information is to reassure Roma children and their families of the fact that they can come to school, that they are welcome to join mainstream schools.

- In the dialogue with Roma children and families, it is also important to emphasize how important it is to learn the lessons taught at school. To this end, the school environment should be welcoming for both Roma children and parents.
- There should be an approach on steadily increasing the representation of Roma in schools and other social environments, in order to deconstruct the stigmas attached to the Roma community.

**Bilingualism:**

- On the issue of a bilingual curriculum, different opinions were raised: should Roma children speak Romani in school or not? Agreement was found on the fact that Romani should be taught to those who are interested to learn it.
- Some found that the Roma language should be used as the language of teaching only in schools where there are many/enough children with Roma as their first language. If only some children are taught in the Roma language, whereas others are taught in another language, this leads to unnecessary segregation of Roma children.
- Bilingual pre-schools, combining Roma language with majority language, was seen as a good solution.

**Content of education:**

- Intercultural and child centered teaching should be included in the curriculum.
- The curriculum should be built up together with parents.
- In pre-school, the learning environment should be enhanced by positive measures.
- Pre-school education does not happen only in kindergartens or other institutions; the child receives education also within the family. Hence, a holistic approach is needed on the content of education.
- On the matter of transition from pre-school to primary school, there were suggestions that there should be one compulsory pre-school year, in order to make a child's entry in primary school easier.
- There should be a possibility to alternative pre-schooling, such as summer pre-schools or step by step projects. However, to ensure coherence between different forms of pre-schools, there should be cooperation and surveillance of different programmes.
- Intercultural values should be included in the curriculum.
- Diversity should be considered as something positive, something to be preferred.
- All cultures of a country should be taught within the curriculum; not only the culture of the major population.
- The main obstacle in the implementation of intercultural curricula is that its support and monitoring mechanisms are not efficient enough. Hence, more support, teacher training and better learning materials are needed.
- Teachers need training on how to administer diversity. To this end, it would be helpful if teachers would visit Roma families and learn about their culture.

*Theme 3: Reinforcing and implementing educational policies in favor of Roma children*

The groups found this question more delicate than the previous ones. The challenge lies in gathering the experiences we already have, and asking how to move forward; how to develop. All the already existing projects have to be used as a basis for further action and development.

**What is needed the most?**

- Financing and management of those programmes which are already successful; not the constant development of new ones.
- Targeting of the projects: who wants to pass a message to whom? In this process of targeting we can try to foresee and prevent possible problems.
- Out of all levels of action, the local level is most important. However, local projects do not succeed unless the regional, national, juridical and international levels are included.
- Experts should be listened to in order to collect and share good practices.
- Research should be coherent and data should be collected carefully. Research, data-collection and monitoring are important also within NGOs.

**Role of civil society:**

- The role of civil society is first and foremost in the monitoring and accountability check of the public sector. As for local school authorities, there should be capacity building, extra funding and a good evaluation of programmes.
- Further, in educating Roma children, it is important for governments and civil society to cooperate. The role of mediators would, in this case, be to function as a link between the two.
- Teachers need monitoring and training. Ministries of Education and Health Care should communicate with civil society in order to find overarching solutions. Both formal and non-formal programmes are needed, side by side.

**Segregation versus integration:**

- There is a constant battle on integration versus segregation: which solution is better when talking about the education of Roma? Mixed kindergartens could be a compromise.
- The right of each child to have a seat at kindergarten should be taken into account. However, it must be kept in mind that this is a right, not an obligation.
- It was recognized that some Roma populations live isolated from other populations. When this is the case, trying to include Roma children in mainstream schools might not be preferred. Hence, it is sometimes better to hold Roma schools aside instead

of forcing Roma children to integrate with other children and, for instance, having to transport them to schools far away.

- In some cases, it is preferable to enhance the quality of education within the separate school instead of trying to force Roma children to mainstream schools.

**Further actions and future collaboration:**

- The Roma issue should be mainstreamed at all levels and good practices should be shared.
- There should be targeting when talking about cultural rights. Cultural rights emerge from self-esteem, which in turn derives from parents. Hence, the self-esteem of Roma should be enhanced by, for instance, cooperating with them in educational questions.
- There was a strong call for specialized conferences on, for instance, curricula development. There should be more international forums where different actors could communicate with each other.
- The curriculum has to be flexible and the individuality of each child should be taken into account.
- Both Roma and non-Roma parents should be given the chance to contribute in the school system.
- Data-bases on good practices should be created, and the existing ones should be enhanced.
- Results of good practice should be disseminated to other Roma communities both within a country and between countries.
- Schools should be responsible for allowing equal access for all children, including Roma children, to education.
- Parents should have the possibility to choose what pre-school they want their children to be in. As a supplement to state kindergartens, pre-schools should be externalized; for instance, there should also be kindergartens run by local NGOs. In countries which have this kind of practice, the externalization of pre-schools has shown positive results in that they give more alternatives to the parents.

**Synthesis by the General Rapporteur (Arthur Ivatts)**

The General Rapporteur reminded the meeting participants of the ambitious tasks that were set for the two day event. He then went on to ask the question as what valuable and tangible tools and experiences had been gained during the time together. A number of key messages had emerged from the meeting of experts. These key messages furnished an impressive list of issues and justifications for further actions.

1. Marshalling the international wisdom and evidence is an essential backdrop and justification for policy creation and implementation.
2. The importance of research and data to inform policy and erode and challenge racist prejudice and distortions of truth.
3. The importance of parents in terms of active involvement, in terms of choice and as a valuable resource in quality pre-school education both in home and school settings.
4. The importance of holistic approaches in policies – 'policy chains' and the need for them to be mapped in terms of what needs to be changed across all the interrelated policy areas. Each link in the policy chain is indispensable.
5. In the main we know what needs to be done but what is needed is their implementation and built in strategies to ensure sustainability, government commitment, scaling up and independent monitoring, evaluation and accountability.
6. The importance of data collection to monitoring and accountability and race equality audits.
7. The importance of listening and Roma involvement at every level.
8. The vital importance of quality training at all levels.
9. The damaging and lasting negative impact of segregation.
10. The importance of deconstructing and redirecting the crude testing of children in order to segregate them into different institutions, towards using testing to monitor individual pupil progress, to identify weaknesses in teaching and in helping in the diagnosis of individual pupils' learning needs.
11. The need for affirmative action in the form of positive resource allocation to Roma children and in mainstreaming provision.
12. The importance of getting the philosophy right and for the language of policy objectives to be compatible with interculturalism and human rights.
13. The importance of early childhood education for as many years as possible prior to transferring to primary school. The self-confident child will be well placed to do well in primary education.
14. The pressing national and international need for immediate and comprehensive actions by all the key players. Delay will only worsen the educational deficit which has existed for far too long.
15. The importance of remembering the weapons in the armoury for effective actions. These include: the value and importance of sharing problems/obstacles/successes/victories; the vital role of the international community; national and international laws/conventions/directives; effective networks working together; the power of parents and the Roma community to

demand justice for their children; and the new impetus to address the glaring inequalities for Roma.

**CONTACTS :**

Council of Europe
F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex
Directorate General IV
Education, culture and heritage, youth and sport
Directorate of Education
Division for the European Dimension of Education

Project « Education of Roma children in Europe »
E-mail : roma.education@coe.int