

# Education of Roma children in Europe

## Guide for Roma school mediators/assistants



# **Guide for Roma school mediators/assistants**

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## 1. Who is the guide for?

A number of European countries employ members of Roma<sup>1</sup> communities to help improve the education of children from those communities. The practicalities of such arrangements vary widely, as do the situations of Roma communities in relation to schooling.

In some countries, for instance, these workers are employed by schools or by the education system, while in others the employer may be a local authority or NGO. Differences may also be observed as regards initial and in-service training, job profiles and specifications and so on. Different terminology is used to designate such positions in different settings. The two most common terms are **mediator** and **assistant**.<sup>2</sup>

Generally speaking, assistants focus primarily on supporting Roma children in the context of school activities (classroom learning, communication with teachers, homework), but also facilitate communication between schools and families. School mediators focus on relations between the school and families, and are also responsible for raising both school and community awareness and informing the Roma community about school-related issues.

Notwithstanding these differences, there is thus a **common core of activities: facilitating relations between the school and the Roma community(ies), and between teachers and other school staff and parents of Roma children**. This is also in line with the text of Recommendation No (2000) 4 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which states:

“Particular attention should also be paid to the need to ensure **better communication with parents**, where necessary using **mediators from the Roma/Gypsy community** which could then lead to career possibilities.”

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<sup>1</sup> “Roma” is used here, as in the case of other documents produced in the project Education of Roma Children in Europe, as a generic term for practical reasons without aiming to impose it to a variety of related groups that have other terms for self-identification. “Roma/Gypsy” is used only for quotes from Recommendation (2000)4 of the Committee of Ministers.

<sup>2</sup> Further details in French, English and Romani may be found in a number of documents available on the Council of Europe’s website, in the section on Education of Roma/Gypsy Children.

“Use should also be made of **mediators from within the Roma/Gypsy community**, in particular **to ease the contacts between Roma/Gypsies, the majority population and schools and to avoid conflicts at school**; this should apply to all levels of schooling.”

As part of its “Education of Roma Children in Europe” project, the Council of Europe has looked at how different member states are implementing this recommendation. As well as highlighting the wide variety of practical measures and a number of good practices in the employment and training of Roma school mediators and assistants, the research identified dangers that might adversely affect their work.

Accordingly, this guide is aimed primarily at all categories of staff from the Roma community working to improve schooling conditions for Roma children,<sup>3</sup> and is intended to provide them with wide-ranging tools and practical guidelines that can be adapted to different contexts. However, it may also be of use to others involved in activities connected with the schooling of Roma children, such as trainers of assistants or mediators, inspectors, school principals, etc.

The guide’s content is therefore designed to help improve the work of Roma school mediators and assistants and reduce the impact of any undesirable effects. In addition, the proposed approach aims at supporting a more structured day-to-day activity and highlight aspects of mediation that are often not used in practice.

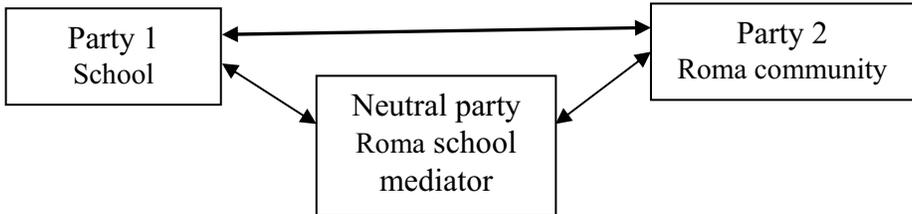
It must be emphasised, however, that the guide is not intended to replace either the specific tools available in different countries, or training for those working to improve communication between schools and the families of Roma children. We hope the guidelines and proposals set out in the guide will be incorporated into initial and in-service training courses, and that the efforts of mediators who opt to organise their work according to the guide will receive the full support of teachers and administrators at all levels of the education system.

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<sup>3</sup> Irrespective of the terms used in different countries: school mediator, teaching assistant, school assistant, etc.

## 2. What does “mediation” mean?

Mediation is a process originally associated with the resolution of conflict situations through the intervention of a neutral third party: the mediator. The mediator participates **with the agreement or at the request of the parties** to the conflict. The **decision** resolving the conflict situation is **taken by the parties rather than the mediator**.



The mediation process is based on the principle that the parties may have different needs, exhibit cultural differences and see things differently. It provides scope for clearly identifying problematic issues, breaking down communication barriers, exploring possible solutions and, should the parties decide on such a course of action, arriving at a solution satisfactory to both parties.

The mediator’s role in this process is to help the parties communicate.

This means the mediator:

- must have both parties’ confidence. If he or she is seen as favouring one party, the process cannot take its proper course and the outcome may be unsustainable or not mutually satisfactory;
- is not responsible for the outcome of the mediation process. He or she may be doing his or her job properly, yet the parties may not arrive at a solution.

Even if no solution is found, the mediation process usually has a positive impact on relations between the parties.

During the mediation process, the mediator's role is to:

- establish a relationship of trust and open communication with the parties' representatives;
- ascertain the situation in order to understand their respective viewpoints and the basis for their opinions, feelings, attitudes and actions;
- establish contact between the parties by ensuring effective communication.

In many cases problems appear because teachers and Roma parents perceive themselves as being on opposite sides and tend to blame each other. A successful mediation process should start from agreeing that both parents and teachers want the best for their children. The mediator should support both parties to move from "stating opposite positions" on a specific matter, towards expressing their needs, interests and priorities, as a basis for a mutually acceptable solution. Details about how to manage a conflict situation through mediation are presented in section 5.6.

A mediation process such as that aimed at facilitating communication between schools and Roma communities is not simply a matter of reacting to conflict situations, but also helps to defuse conflicts and ensure constructive progress towards measures geared to the needs, viewpoints and interests of both parties.

In addition, it should be made clear that conflicts are not necessarily negative. Conflicts are inevitable in any society. The key is to set up mechanisms for handling conflict which emphasise the constructive role it can play.

### **3. School mediators**

#### **3.1. What do Roma school mediators do?**

The role and practical responsibilities of the mediator will depend a great deal on the kinds of issues specific to the schooling of Roma children in the context of your work. According to the situation and the priorities, you will focus on objectives such as:

- ensuring school attendance;
- preventing and tackling the problem of school drop-outs;
- encouraging academic success;
- favouring positive relations between Roma and non-Roma children.

If school attendance at early ages is not an issue, the work will concentrate on the reasons pupils drop out of school and ways to improve their chances of academic success. If, on the other hand, the local community faces problems such as access to schooling or the school being rejected by the local Roma community, these issues should be addressed by working with both partners: the school and the community.

In more practical terms, the work of a mediator will focus (*inter alia*) on:

- welcoming Roma children to the school and helping them integrate, particularly at the start of the school year;
- facilitating communication between the school and Roma parents;
- fostering a school climate conducive to intercultural communication between Roma and non-Roma based on mutual understanding and recognition.

For the purpose of achieving these objectives, your duties will include:

- visiting families, particularly those living in underprivileged neighbourhoods, with a view to ascertaining the social environment, parental attitudes and children's state of health;
- arranging meetings and working with parents to involve them more fully in the education process;
- informing the community of measures connected with the education of Roma children and making Roma families aware of the need for pre-school and school education;
- promoting tolerance, helping to overcome prejudice and encouraging contact between Roma and non-Roma parents and children;
- offering special activities for Roma mothers;
- helping to arrange meetings between teachers and Roma parents;
- working with Roma and non-Roma NGOs;
- helping to identify the school population;
- encouraging young Roma to pursue their studies beyond primary school and helping them gain access to proper vocational guidance;
- providing mediation for conflicts between and within communities, and publicising the availability of such mediation;
- encouraging parents to participate in their children's education and in school activities;
- informing the school of specific issues that may have arisen within the community, and alerting the authorities;

- supporting children at school;
- organising activities for children.

### **3.2. Essential skills for Roma school mediators**

In order to do a good job, Roma school mediators should:

- be familiar with the local community in general and the Roma community in particular;
- be familiar with the school environment (both the local school and its teachers and the education system as a whole, including the regulations and the facilities available for disadvantaged children, particularly Roma);
- be familiar with local authorities, the social welfare system, protection of children's rights and so on.

In addition, mediators should have a good understanding of Roma culture in general, the history and different aspects of Roma cultural identity, the current position of Roma at national and European level and the various forms of discrimination to which Roma are often subjected.

Mediators should also demonstrate good mediation and communication skills. If they are genuinely to bridge two cultures, they must possess intercultural communication skills as well as general communication skills (active listening, open mind, etc.) and an ability to communicate with children. They must therefore:

- speak both the language used in the education system and the language of the Roma community (if applicable) well;
- understand the “cultural codes” of both the majority culture and the Roma culture, that is, know how to behave in both environments and being able to see the meaning attributed to specific behaviours in both cultures, as well as the reasons behind them.

In addition to specific personal qualities and a genuine interest in this kind of work, acquisition of the above skills necessitates a learning process that can take various forms (initial training, training courses, seminars, field training – under the supervision of an experienced mediator, for example – and so on).

## **4. Organisational suggestions**

### **4.1. Annual work cycle**

Your work as a Roma school mediator will take place throughout the school year, involving regular interaction with:

- school management and staff;
- Roma parents;
- Roma children;
- other members of the local Roma community;
- other children and their parents;
- representatives of local government institutions and NGOs active locally;
- where applicable, educational administrators responsible for supervising mediators at different levels (regional level, for example).

Let us imagine that you are taking on this role at the start of the school year. We shall follow your work step by step, attempting to identify key elements that are applicable regardless of the specific context and ensure the best chance of success while avoiding pitfalls and dangers.

At the very outset of your work as a mediator, you will undertake a crucial phase: making contact with the different groups of people with whom you will have to interact, and preparing the ground for your subsequent work.

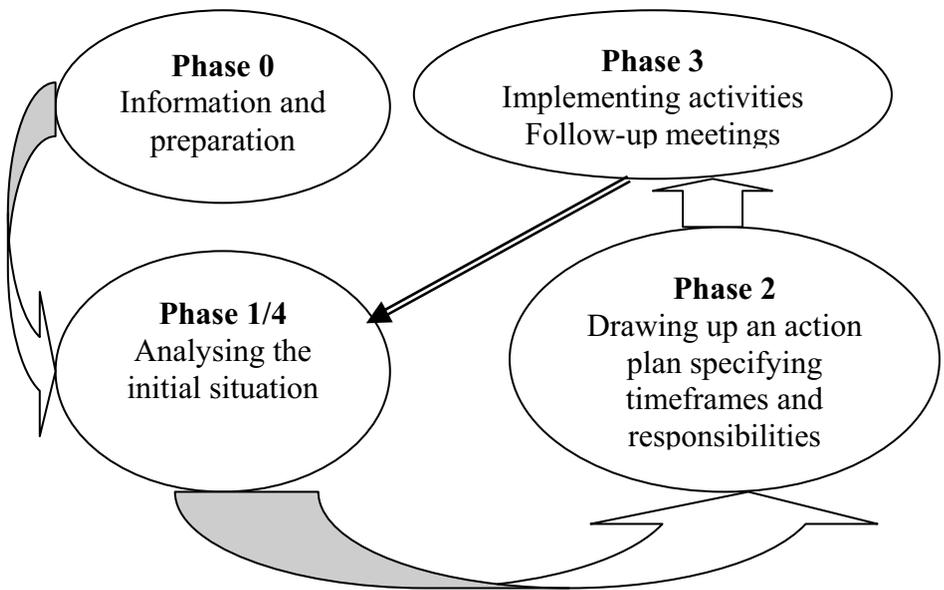
Once this phase has been completed, your work will involve a cycle that is repeated each year.

This cycle (see diagram below) begins with (1) a phase of analysing the situation at the start of each school year, thereby assessing key aspects of the education of Roma children at your school.

During the next phase, (2) on the basis of the findings yielded by the analysis phase, you will ask representatives of the school and the Roma community to set joint objectives and priorities for the coming school year and draw up an action plan for accomplishing them.

It is then a matter of (3) contributing to the implementation of the action plan, both through the activities for which you are directly responsible and by following up the efforts of the other people concerned (in the school and the community) and helping them fulfil their undertakings.

Lastly, the final phase (4/1) consists in evaluating the implementation of the action plan and the resulting situation at the end of the school year; this may also be regarded as phase 1 of the next cycle.



This approach is consistent with the concept of mediation, the mediator being someone who supports the parties and helps them reach a mutually satisfactory solution, but it also takes into account the need:

- not to consider the mediator solely responsible for failures or successes;

- to provide the mediator with the necessary tools and resources to avoid various forms of manipulation;
- to state the mediator's tasks and responsibilities clearly so that he or she can evaluate his or her work properly and continually attempt to improve it .

To this end, however, you must bear in mind at each stage the limits of your position as a Roma school mediator and use appropriate tools in order to perform your duties effectively. Moreover, if your work is to be effective, everything you do must be part of a wider school policy aimed at improving every child's education.

## **4.2. Step-by-step guide**

### **Phase 0 – starting work: information and preparation**

**Objective and strategy:** Identify the key people with whom you will be working, introduce yourself to them and explain your role. Practical strategies will depend a great deal on the local situation. If you are originally from the community in which you are to work as a mediator, that will make this phase easier; however, it is still important to meet key people and make them all aware of your new position and your plans.

#### **Activities:**

- Make contact with school management and establish a contractual relationship (clarifying specific responsibilities on both sides and the procedures to be followed in the event of problems. Details are given in the section 5.1.
- Meeting with teachers and explaining your role and the process envisaged. This should be done by attending a teachers' meeting, where the school principal will introduce you, explain your tasks and request teachers to provide support, while defining the ways you will communicate and cooperate with the teaching staff and other school staff. Your status in the school team could also be improved if this meeting will be attended also, if this is possible, by special

guests, such as inspectors in charge with schooling of Roma children, Roma leaders, NGO representatives, etc.

- Meetings with key figures in the Roma community(ies) to introduce yourself and explain the type of work you will be doing. Particularly in traditional communities it is important to take into account internal community networks and hierarchies, prove respect for the leaders by meeting them first. However, it is important to also meet influential mothers and young people that can provide support for your work. In some cases there are different Roma groups in the local community and it is important to make sure you meet representative of all of them and explain that your task is to support all Roma children to get better education.
- Meetings with any other individuals and representatives of government institutions or NGOs relevant to your work as a mediator. As in many cases educational difficulties of Roma children are associated with a situation of social disadvantage, establishing a good cooperation with representatives of the social services will be extremely important.

### **Phase 1 – analysing the initial situation**

**Objective and strategy:** Gathering information at the start of the school year about the situation with regard to the schooling of Roma children. Objective data (for example, statistics) must be combined with efforts to ascertain the subjective opinions of all concerned. What teachers, parents, children and the other people involved think is just as important as the actual situation.

#### **Activities:**

- Recording data about the Roma children in the school and within the community. This activity should be done very carefully, avoiding the problems that might arise from the fact that some children prefer not to be identified in school as Roma. Their option must be respected but you should be aware that this can change in time. If a positive and secure environment is gradually created in the school and if being a Roma is not associated with negative stereotypes, they might

feel comfortable to acknowledge their affiliation to Roma community. This does not prevent you from including in your database Roma and non-Roma children that have various kinds of difficulties and that might benefit from your support.

- Identify, where applicable, the number of Roma children not enrolled at school, the families concerned and the motivations of this situation. This can only be done in an effective way with the support of the local community. Sometimes there are situations of disrupted attendance, due to temporary migration, or to an itinerant lifestyle, and you should aim at both at obtaining information about how many children are affected, and at understanding the reasons and barriers preventing them from attending school regularly.
- Obtain data on Roma children's academic results and participation in extra-curricular activities organised by the school. The cooperation of the teaching staff is essential for this. You must take into account the possible restrictions that you might face in accessing children's data. Families can compensate this by providing you with information on a voluntary basis. But in most cases it is possible to get from the school management at least a statistical situation of the school performance of self-declared Roma children.
- Organise group and individual discussions with parents, teachers, other members of the community and so on, in order to obtain from them information about the way they perceive the situation of Roma children in school, the main challenges and needs. You will find some advice in sections 5.2. and 5.3.
- Discuss with the children in order to get also their perspective. In most cases it will be more effective to have individual discussions with Roma and non-Roma children to ask them what they think. When speaking with Roma children it is important to give them the confidence that you are supportive and that they can share with you their even thoughts that they would not mention to teachers, colleagues or parents, but avoid creating or accentuating negative attitudes towards teachers and non-Roma colleagues. On the contrary, you should promote a positive and constructive attitude, based on the idea

that everybody's rights must be equally respected. Details are presented in section 5.4.

## **Phase 2 – helping to draw up an action plan**

**Objective and strategy:** Asking school management, members of the teaching staff and representatives of Roma parents to set specific objectives and agree on the action to be taken and changes to be made, so that each can help improve the schooling of Roma children and relations between Roma and non-Roma children. As a mediator, your role in this process is to incite and encourage both teachers and parents to become involved. The example afforded by your own plans plays a crucial role in encouraging parents and teachers to take responsibility. You will thereby gain the support of both sides, together with relevant, constructive suggestions for the organisation of subsequent work. Such an approach will mobilise and empower both the school staff and the members of Roma community.

### **Activities:**

- Ask, both teachers and parents to state their expectations (on the basis of the findings of the previous phase): what does each side think needs to be changed? These discussions, which may take place on an individual basis or at meetings, generate a list of proposed changes to the existing situation.
- Ask representatives of both parties to identify, from this list, priorities by focusing on changes that can be achieved within the current school year and with the resources available – or potentially available – to the school and local community.
- Finalise the action plan by asking teachers, parents (and, where applicable, the other people involved, such as the parents' association representative, the social worker and representatives of local authorities, NGOs and other local community organisations or groups) to identify what each can do to advance towards the changes envisaged. As part of this process, you will state the responsibilities that you can take and include them in the plan. This will result in a list of specific measures, with one or more people responsible for each, and timeframes. Once this is achieved, it is important to

check the results with all persons, organisations or institutions that appear with responsibilities in the plan, in order to avoid misunderstandings. You should specify that the plan might need periodic revisions, that additions are welcome, and that you must remain flexible to respond in the best way possible to new challenges.

### **Phase 3 – overseeing the implementation of the action plan**

**Objective and strategy:** Improving the schooling of Roma children and their relations with non-Roma children by implementing the measures set out in the action plan drawn up in conjunction with representatives of teachers and Roma parents.

#### **Activities:**

- Ensure that all persons and institutions concerned are aware of the action plan (including the objectives, that is, the changes envisaged, and the list of specific measures); The plan should be displayed in a visible place in the school, presented and discussed during a teachers' meeting and during meetings with parents. A key task is to make sure that community members are also aware of the plan and some of its elements might need additional explanations, in an accessible language.
- Implement the measures for which you, as a mediator, already took responsibility, as specified in the action plan. Make sure that you communicate the progress obtained and that both people in the community and school staff is informed about what you do.
- Meet regularly the various people listed in the action plan (teachers, parents, other members of the community, representatives of institutions and NGOs and so on) to find out what is being done, offer support, identify obstacles, provide mediation in order to break deadlocks where necessary, offer encouragement and take note of achievements.
- Meet with the people involved or concerned by the activities, including members of the Roma community that are in a

difficult situation, even if they do not attend the meetings that you organise in the community or in the school.

- Attend regularly school staff meetings to review progress, explain your work and activities with the community and receive suggestions and requests from teachers.
- Organise joint monitoring meetings with the ones that appear with precise responsibilities and other interested participants. At these meetings, which should be announced and planned with enough time in advance, participants should be asked to describe what they did, mentioning both difficulties and achievements. Ask school management to present a synthesis of the progress made. Avoid focalising the discussion on barriers and difficulties and move the emphasis on analysing possible solutions, while underlining the successes obtained by all parties. Between one and two such meetings should take place during each semester. They will be finalised with a revision of the action plan (activities accomplished will be marked, some activities might need to be reformulated, some responsibilities could be modified and some new tasks can be added). This revised plan must be communicated to all stakeholders and will serve as a reference for the activities to follow.

#### **Phase 4 – helping to evaluate the implementation of the action plan**

**Objective and strategy:** Evaluating what has been achieved during the school year. This is essential in order both to conclude the activities of one school year and to start (phase 1) a new cycle for the following year. Accordingly, this phase may be divided into two parts: an evaluation conducted at the end of the school year, while impressions of the measures taken are still fresh, and an additional phase at the start of the next school year, similar to drawing up a new action plan (phase 2); this affords an opportunity both to recall the conclusions of the initial evaluation phase and to update that information, incorporating those children expected to join the school during the coming school year and the outcome of holiday activities run by yourself, as a mediator, or others (the school, NGOs, etc.).

**Activities:**

- Collect information about the situation through group and individual discussions with parents, teachers, other members of the community and so on.
- Discuss with the children in order to obtain their perspective and compare it with the feedback obtained during previous discussions.
- Combining information gathered during the school year with that obtained from the school on Roma children's academic results and on their participation in extra-curricular activities organised by the school. School management and/or a group of teachers can help this process.
- Review with the group of active stakeholders the measures mentioned in the action plan, point by point. Compare them with what has actually been done. Where there are discrepancies, it is important to identify the difficulties encountered and the changes that need to be made in order to improve the situation. The conclusions should not focus on what has not succeeded or on who did not do what he or she promised, but on general lessons learned and on what and how to do in the future to improve chances of success.

## **5. Practical guidelines**

### **5.1. Working with school management**

Your job as a mediator may have arisen from a decision taken by the school, the education authorities, local government or a non-governmental organisation working with the school. Depending on the situation, there are different ways of establishing a relationship with school management.

Whatever the case, however, school management will have a decisive influence on the success of your work.

In an ideal world, you will have the full support of school management. In reality, this is not always the case. Sometimes, although it may not be made clear, the head teacher sees you as “the solution to the problems of schooling for Roma children”, expecting you to find the magic recipe that will put a stop to such problems. What are you then to do?

The best advice is to draw up a “contract” with school management from the outset, clearly and explicitly specifying responsibilities on both sides and how the situation is to be handled if undertakings are not fulfilled. This document is neither your employment contract nor the job specification listing your duties as a mediator, but a document setting out clear procedures in the event of problems.

The mediator should draw up this document in conjunction with school management on taking up his or her post, bearing in mind the specific situation of the school and community. Its main purpose is to simplify the mediator’s job by guarding against undesirable effects, such as:

- use of the mediator as an odd-job person;
- exploitation of the mediator by the school or community;
- conflicting pressures on the mediator (where his or her employer is a local authority or NGO rather than the school, for example, in which case it is better if representatives of

these institutions are involved in drafting the contract with school management);

- the mediator becoming a “scapegoat”, being held responsible for any difficulties or failures.

Make sure you bring up any delicate matters when the contract is drafted. It is better to do this at the outset rather than suffering the consequences throughout the school year.

Two issues, which are never covered in employment contracts or job specifications, are crucial in this connection:

1. What is your position in relation to the school and the Roma community?

In many cases mediators are employed by the school or the education system. There is therefore an expectation, expressed or otherwise, that the mediator will primarily represent the interests and views of the school, or of school management. Likewise, since the mediator is of Roma origin, members of the Roma community may pressure him or her to assert his or her role as a Roma representative or advocate. It must be explicitly stated that the mediator will maintain a neutral position. This avoids, or reduces, the risk of pressure from management regarding the task of mediation.

2. What to do in the event of problems

While the mediator’s tasks are normally set out in a separate document attached to his or her employment contract, the school should also specify how it intends to support his or her work and the responsibilities it intends to take on. In some cases, job specifications do not clearly state what the mediator has to do. The first step is therefore to specify the mediator’s tasks. During this initial phase, however, the mediator should also ask school management to provide an explicit written description of its own responsibilities. Management may then be asked to advise the mediator what to do in the event that school management or staff fail to fulfil the undertakings given. This explicit description may subsequently serve as a crucial tool in the mediator’s work, reducing the risk of conflict with school management and staff. For example, it may be stated in writing that,

in such a situation, the mediator must first request a meeting with management to explain his or her point of view; if the problem is not resolved, he or she should then approach a higher authority (a school inspector, the school's board of governors, the mayor, etc., as applicable).

Another key aspect that ought to be clarified at this stage is respect for confidentiality. As a mediator, if a parent, member of the community or teacher gives an opinion or information to you, asking you not to disclose it to others, you have a duty to keep that information to yourself. Not even school management has the right to ask you to communicate such information without the agreement of the person who gave it to you.

For more information about drafting the contract with management, see chapter 6.

This document should be taken out at every meeting you have with school management throughout the year. You should check together on a regular basis that it is being implemented; where necessary, adjustments may be made in the light of such discussions.

## **5.2. Raising parental awareness and educating schools about the need to work with families**

Good relations with families can be crucial in strengthening the school's position and making it more effective. This is even more important in the case of underprivileged families, and when children encounter problems at school. Schools that learn how to communicate well with parents and work with them derive significant benefits:

- greater parental involvement in different areas of school life;
- greater willingness on the part of parents and teachers to communicate, share opinions and inform the mediator of misunderstandings and conflict situations at an early stage;
- better academic results, bearing in mind that parental support and encouragement for children's learning will have a positive long-term impact;

- more positive attitudes and behaviour on the part of children.

The vast majority of parents want:

- the best for their children, both in terms of schooling and in general. For most, this means quality education that is meaningful to the child's life, provided in a favourable emotional environment;
- to be kept informed about what the school is doing and how its activities affect their children;
- clear, comprehensible, balanced information about their children's learning progress and difficulties;
- practical advice about how they can support their children as they learn.

Notwithstanding the great benefits of developing an effective partnership between families and the school, this is not always straightforward. In some cases, Roma families need specific measures, special arrangements and extra help to enable them to participate fully in school life, support their children and work with teachers.

All parents want their views to be taken into account; in many cases, however, their own negative experiences of school and government institutions in general make it difficult for them to trust the school, even when teachers show a clear interest in them.

Experience has shown that, in order to develop an effective relationship with parents, schools must:

- use a variety of techniques rather than focusing exclusively on formal meetings with parents;
- show an ongoing interest in what every parent has to say;
- show that parents' opinions, requests and suggestions are taken into account.

Where there are significant cultural differences between the Roma community and the school environment, such an approach becomes even more complex. As a school mediator, therefore, you have an essential role to play: conveying to Roma parents the message that the school is receptive to their views, and explaining, translating and clarifying the opinions, behaviour and expectations of Roma parents for school representatives. In doing so, you must maintain a balanced position, avoiding being seen by parents as a representative of the system who wishes to impose his or her view on the community.

Why listen to parents' opinions?

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

### **5.3. Communicating with parents**

Don't forget that there are different types of family: couples with children, extended families including several generations, lone-parent families where just one parent lives with the children, and situations where children live with grandparents or other people.

It should also be borne in mind that some Roma parents may not have gone to school and may not feel comfortable participating in school activities or interacting with teachers or other parents.

For various reasons, many parents – both Roma and non-Roma – find it difficult to maintain ongoing communication with the school. These

include the pace of life, a lack of confidence in the school, the way teachers communicate and teachers' lack of understanding of the realities of parents' day-to-day lives.

You should also be particularly sensitive to traveller families or families arriving in the community following a period of travel. A meeting should be held with parents and/or other relatives to inform them of the school's policy on school attendance by Roma children and the role of the Roma school mediator in this connection. Set up a support system for parents who have just arrived.

Your presence is especially important in those communities where parents travel abroad. In most such cases, children are left with other relatives. These children need greater encouragement to continue at school, and their academic results should be monitored. Where parents travel with children, you must take steps to help the children fit back into school and gain access to additional remedial programmes.

As a mediator, you must make yourself available to parents and gain their trust in your receptiveness and ability to answer their questions. This can be achieved, for example, by having set hours each week during which you can be contacted both at and outside the school. Organising monthly meetings with parents can also be a good solution. The mediator should contact separately those families who do not wish to engage in relations with the school: take a positive approach, however, telling them about the meeting and encouraging them to attend future meetings without accusing them. Meetings can also take place outside the school where this is possible.

Use appropriate language whenever communicating with parents (avoid words whose exact meaning may not be clear to them), and avoid adopting an inflexible, bureaucratic attitude.

It is important to take into account each family's specific circumstances and ensure a balance between encouragement and the provision of information when communicating with parents. Don't ask for things that are beyond the family's capabilities or put it in an embarrassing situation. For example, avoid communicating in writing if parents have reading difficulties.

Encourage parents to help their children to learn, but identify appropriate tasks (relating their experiences, for example). The mediator has an essential role to play in helping each parent identify positive elements of his or her experience and knowledge that might be relevant to classroom learning while also heightening the self-esteem of the parents and children concerned. Where after-school remedial programmes are available locally, you should encourage the parents of those children needing such assistance to enrol them.

Particular consideration should be given to the transition from primary to secondary school. Parents should be directly consulted in a very open, but not superficial, way about decisions to steer children towards a particular course of study or occupation.

It is also important to encourage parents to become involved in school activities as volunteers, depending on their interests and availability, and to ensure that Roma parents are represented in parents' associations.

Don't forget that one of your main tasks is to listen to parents, while remaining discreet and respecting distinctive cultural features and differences between Roma groups. You must avoid entering into conflict with families, by communicating openly and acting appropriately, thereby retaining their respect and trust.

#### **5.4. Communicating with children**

Bear in mind that as a school mediator you are an important role model for Roma children. Your impact on children may therefore go far beyond the direct support you offer them through your work.

You should establish a relationship characterised by positive, open communication with Roma children, irrespective of their sub-group or social status, encouraging the development of positive attitudes and fostering effective learning.

Research on learning shows that children learn best if they:

- feel comfortable and safe;

- are involved in activities that are challenging but not anxiety-inducing;
- regularly receive positive, detailed feedback from adults about their work;
- believe they are capable of succeeding.

To develop positive relationships with children, a mediator must:

- establish a relationship of trust by initiating communication, taking an interest in what children are doing and thinking and in their feelings, needs and demands, and demonstrating an ability to see things from their point of view as well;
- identify and give feedback on positive aspects of children's behaviour, congratulate them not only on their achievements but also on doing day-to-day activities well, and thank them;
- acknowledge children's right and ability to make choices; rather than telling children what they have to do, it is better to identify their options and the consequences of each. This instils a sense of responsibility in children and encourages them to make mental links between choices and consequences, reducing the frequency of conflict situations;
- enhance children's self-esteem. If children have a continually negative experience of school and fail to achieve, over time they will start to believe that they are incapable of succeeding. This causes them to accept the idea that such a lack of success is normal for them. They will thereby develop a negative attitude towards school, prompting them to opt out of learning; they will have a tendency either to withdraw and avoid challenges (which are precisely the best source of learning), or to engage in negative and even violent behaviour. Self-esteem can be heightened, however, by means of effective strategies on the part of teachers and adults in general. As a mediator, this means that at all times you should explicitly express an attitude of trust in the child's abilities, convey the message that he or she is valued despite his or her failures and, as far as possible, put him or her in situations in which he or she can experience success and feel valued.

You should monitor and regularly encourage participation by Roma children in:

- individual and group activities in class;
- extra-curricular activities;
- the student council.

As soon as you identify Roma children who are marginalised or excluded from certain educational activities for various reasons, or whenever such cases are brought to your attention by teachers or parents, your role is to bring together those in a position to intervene (teaching staff, school management, school psychologist, parents, etc.) with a view to improving the situation and asking them to suggest solutions.

### **5.5. Organising meetings**

All your work as a mediator is aimed at establishing effective dialogue between the school and the community. This also involves organising meetings with teachers, with parents and with members of the Roma community, as well as with participants from both sides.

In order to prepare properly for a meeting with community representatives, you need to establish a relationship of trust and identify key people who could play a more active role in the entire process. If you already have contacts within the community, you can build on existing relationships. It is also a good idea to involve community leaders and the most competent individuals (traditional chiefs, elders, religious authorities, leaders of women's groups and representatives of Roma organisations, as applicable) from the outset. These individuals play a key role in communication with the community: they can provide information, make useful suggestions and put development workers in touch with other people. The support of community leaders lends credibility to your work, as well as contributing to its success and sustainability. This can also help to attract the interest of a significant proportion of the community, even outside the group of parents directly concerned.

Once these contacts have been established, particularly in the case of small, compact communities, it is a good idea to arrange a meeting with the whole community. If the entire community meets regularly or for a specific reason (for particular celebrations, for example, or as part of a community development process), you can ask to speak at such a meeting. If not, you can ask local leaders to call a special meeting. This initial meeting will give you an opportunity to introduce yourself and explain your role. Over the next few days or at subsequent meetings, you can continue the discussion individually or in small groups.

In the course of such discussions, you must be careful not to create misunderstandings and to avoid making promises you cannot keep. The community must be informed from the outset of your intentions, your scope to intervene and your limits.

It is essential to involve as many people as possible in this dialogue on education and relations with the school. You should ascertain the timetables of the different groups within the community, such as men, women, young people and adults, so that you can liaise with the community to organise visits and meetings at times when those groups are available. Other arrangements may be necessary in order to ensure that the people concerned can attend. Women, for example, may need childcare facilities. Such arrangements can also be discussed and planned with the community.

Women usually have a key part to play in getting this participatory process off the ground, owing to their prominent role in children's upbringing and the management of family affairs.

Those families and individuals most in need of help tend not to be involved in consultation and community decision-making processes. This isolates them further from development opportunities. Similarly, other social groups, such as young people, are often excluded. You can attempt to identify such groups from the outset, and actively promote their involvement in all aspects of your work.

How you communicate during the meeting may be crucial if you are to reach valid conclusions. You should avoid positioning yourself as a representative of the education system who has come to moralise, or talking in terms and on subjects with no bearing on the day-to-day lives of members of the Roma community. The crucial role you have

to play at such meetings is primarily a listening role. You must, of course, ask questions in order to encourage people to speak up and foster discussion. The other essential role you have to play is that of moderator: you must ensure that everyone has a chance to express his or her views, while respecting any community customs (elders may speak first, for example).

In meetings with teachers – notwithstanding the differences – you should adopt a similar position. Here too, you will have to ask for the support of school management and either attend routine meetings or request a special meeting.

The key is both to allow teachers to express their views and to ask them what they can do to improve the situation and what they think you, as a mediator, can do to help them. You should note down (or ask a teacher to help you do so) all the ideas discussed and conclusions reached. Participants should receive a report of each meeting so that they can make any corrections, and you should refer to the conclusions during subsequent meetings.

As a mediator, you will organise various types of meeting, including:

- meetings of a group of parents to establish a common position on an issue;
- meetings with teachers to convey a message from the community, evaluate the educational situation of Roma children, take note of the needs and recommendations expressed by teaching staff, plan subsequent work, present the work done and so on;
- meetings at which Roma parents meet teachers or representatives of different local government institutions.

For each meeting, don't forget to:

- check that key participants are available (on both sides, if teachers and parents are to attend), set the date and time in consultation with them and notify them sufficiently in advance;

- inform all participants of the subject of the meeting and remind them of the date and time in the days leading up to the meeting;
- take note of the main ideas generated during the discussion and the decisions taken;
- communicate the conclusions reached and decisions taken to all participants, at the end of the meeting or shortly afterwards, and notify other people concerned who did not attend the meeting of those decisions (for example, other teachers and other members of the Roma community).

Bearing in mind the work programme suggested in the previous chapter, it would be a good idea to consider giving titles to each of the main meetings planned so as to clarify the objectives.

At the beginning of the school year, for example, the initial meeting between teachers and the parents of Roma children starting school could be entitled, “Getting to know one other”.

Once the necessary information on the initial situation and the needs of each side has been obtained, a meeting could be held under the title, “Children’s success depends on us as well”. Each party’s contribution to the action plan will be discussed at this meeting.

Lastly, the evaluation meeting at the end of the school year could be entitled, “Together we can do more”; it will yield important conclusions with a view to improvements the following year.

## **5.6. Managing conflicts by means of mediation**

As explained in chapter 2, mediation is also a technique for effective management of conflict situations. Naturally, in the course of your work, by systematically facilitating communication between teachers and the families of Roma children you will help to prevent such situations developing. Conflict cannot always be avoided, however, and sometimes a conflict – if managed constructively – may have positive repercussions, unleashing energy that will help to improve the situation all round.

In order to manage a conflict situation by means of mediation, it is essential both to respect the principles of mediation, as listed in chapter 2, and to follow certain procedures and stages.

For instance, the mediator must:

- ensure that both parties agree on his or her involvement and accept that his or her position is halfway between them;
- hold separate meetings with each side to identify the problem and each party's needs, positions, interests and fears; explain that your position requires you to keep the information received confidential and that it is up to each party to decide what to communicate to the others and how to go about this;
- organise a meeting between the parties (or their representatives)
  - ❖ this meeting should take place in a neutral setting if possible, and in any event in a setting in which both parties feel at ease;
  - ❖ during the meeting, the rules of communication must first be established by consensus, possibly at the mediator's suggestion (for example, allowing balanced speaking time, maintaining an attitude of mutual respect and so on);
  - ❖ when each party expresses its view of the problem and its own needs, the mediator can then step in with questions intended to clarify the situation, possibly rephrasing the content to ensure that it has been correctly understood by the other party;
  - ❖ lastly, the mediator will ask each party to think of possible solutions, bearing in mind the needs expressed by the other party;
- help the parties draw up a list of possible solutions;

- discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each solution with each party, retaining those that might be acceptable to both parties;
- help the parties agree on a joint solution and clearly specify each side's responsibilities for implementing the decision taken;
- bring the process to a close by reiterating the solution chosen, check with each party that the solution and its consequences have been clearly understood and undertake to be available if they need his or her help in implementing or perhaps reviewing the accepted solution.

Throughout the process, don't forget to:

- maintain a positive attitude towards both parties and actively listen to them;
- try to see beyond behaviour and words in order to understand the different viewpoints; most conflicts arise from incorrect interpretations;
- focus on the problem rather than the people, and use appropriate language to describe situations;
- use open questions designed to clarify the situation, and ask for more information in order to gain a proper understanding of each side's argument;
- identify barriers to communication and try to help overcome them;
- request, if necessary, the opinion of other people who might be able to provide solutions to the problem, but without disclosing confidential information obtained from the parties to the conflict.

## **5.7. Tackling language, cultural and identity-related issues**

The Recommendation 4(2000) of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, cited in introduction, mentions the employment of mediators « issued from the Roma community ». Indeed, by sharing with Roma children a common cultural background, the communication and comprehension, both with Roma children and with their parents will be facilitated. Moreover, in many cases, the Roma Mediator or Assistant is the only Roma person within the whole educational staff. It is obvious that such a person will also represent a role model for the Roma children.

Taking into account the importance of this quality of role model, it is however essential to consider the image transmitted from this perspective to the Roma children: if the mediator is perceived as inferior to the other categories of staff in the school, or as an instrument of the school imposing to the Roma community a model seen as superior, the psychological impact of children's self esteem will be negative.

Of course, you can do a good job as a mediator even without belonging to the respective community. In any case, you need to take into account the local specific situation. Indeed, there is a great diversity of Roma communities and your work needs to be adapted to the local context and to the need of the concerned communities.

In some communities specific languages are used, differing from the majority language (for instance, various dialects of the Romani language). Speaking the language of the local Roma community represents a clear advantage for the mediation process and will encourage the openness towards better communication of the members of the Roma community.

However, often, school staff is not aware that the Roma speak a different language and this fact is not taken into account in the planning and implementation of educational activities. It is your task to inform the teachers and the school management about the situation of the languages used in the families of the Roma pupils, but also to advise about the best ways to make these languages recognised and, if possible, visible within the school. Such an action will certainly improve the perception that Roma children and their parents have

about the school. Even if you do not speak the local language you may learn some words (greetings, basic words in a conversation) and show this way your respect for the Roma community.

Some communities have strong informal structures, based on tradition, while in others the traditional social relations are not present. Your task as mediator is not to push the traditional communities towards modernisation, nor to encourage the modernised communities to rediscover their tradition or their specific identity markers. However, you can have an important role by supporting the members of the community, or of the communities you work in, in their attempt to define and formulate their aspirations and their requests in this regard and by passing on the conclusions to the school.

Particularly sensitive are the situations when certain traditions are not compatible with the values and the principles of a democratic society. Such is the case, for instance, of issues concerning the role of women, the right of girls to education under the same conditions as boys, arranged marriages, imposition on the young people of decisions taken by elderly or by traditional leaders, based on their status in traditional communities, etc. You need to be firm and clear in these cases and explain that you respect the traditions and the values of the Roma community in question but as long as they are in agreement with fundamental principles such as the respect for the dignity, equality and rights of each individual, regardless of gender, age, social status or belonging to a specific cultural or ethnic group. Un argument that could be brought in this context for avoiding negative reactions or feelings of inferiority from the part of the members of the Roma community is to mention that in all traditional rural communities in Europe, only a few decades ago, traditions opposed to human rights were present and that within a rather short period their influence has been strongly diminished. A very effective way in the attempt to make these fundamental values accepted by the traditional communities is to start by convincing the leaders or members of their families and to engage them in promoting these ideas within the community. However, you should keep in mind that these changes in attitudes and social behaviour need a lot of time and patience from the mediator, as well as from the school.

There are also situations where members of the community do not affirm publicly their affiliation to the Roma ethnic group. Your

essential task is from this point of view, not to impose an external cultural identity, but to offer the best chances to all children to develop a positive social identity. They should have the freedom not to be labelled as Roma by the others if they wish so, but also the right to feel ok as Roma, to be proud of their affiliation and of their culture.

In certain cases one cannot speak about only one Roma community associated to a school, but of different groups of Roma origin, without relations between them, or having relations of opposition, even conflict. This happens more and more in cities of Western or Southern Europe, where besides local Roma some Roma communities from Central and Eastern Europe have recently arrived. In such situations, you need to facilitate also the relationships between the Roma parents of these communities. You need to explain clearly to the representatives of all groups that your work aims at facilitating the access to a quality education for all Roma children and to maintain a balanced attitude, without favouring one group or the other. An open communication, transparency of your actions and the regular consultation with representatives of each group are the best options for preventing tensions among Roma groups and between them and the school. You should also insist that the school also expresses an equidistant attitude and attention to the needs of all groups.

An other type of sensitive situation that risks to be found in the work of a Roma school mediator is represented by the exhibition, often in a hidden or even unconscious way, of racist attitudes or of discriminatory behaviour within the school, by teachers, pupils, parents of other pupils, other school staff or even by school management. Two reactions are possible towards such situations: confronting explicitly the person in question, or adopting a more « diplomatic » approach, trying to gradually determine an increased awareness and a positive change of attitudes and behaviours. The choice between these options depends on the concrete situation and it is up to you to choose. You only need to take into account that confrontation, if that is judged necessary, needs to be done without delay, immediately after the problematic situation and that it implies the risk of a defensive reaction and of an open conflict that can harm the effectiveness of your work and the relations within the school staff. If you choose a gradual approach, you may, for instance, emphasise the example of persons and situations that contradict the stereotypes and prejudices, considering that often the racist

convictions and behaviours rely on abusive generalisation of specific situations. A much more effective solution is to propose to school management the organisation of training courses for teachers or the participation of teachers from your school to courses organised by various institutions, on issues concerning education for Roma children, including modules of anti-racist and anti-discrimination training.

Finally, among the many controversial elements related to identity issues appearing in the work of Roma school mediator, we mention here also the European and International Roma movement. Knowing about the initiatives taken at European and international levels for the recognition and affirmation of a common, transnational, Roma identity, supported by the Council of Europe and by other international bodies, can contribute in a very pertinent way to the development of self-esteem and of a positive identity of Roma children. However, you should be careful that this pan European and transnational process is not accepted and supported by all Roma groups and communities. Therefore, before speaking about this to the children and to the teachers, check the attitude of the leaders of the community, or of the communities with whom you work, and, if needed, inform them, before speaking to the others.

## **6. Tools and documentation**

Your work can be facilitated considerably by using a series of tools, including:

- **a diary**

A dated diary can be used, but an ordinary exercise book is often a better solution. The key is to note the date at the top of each page and then to give a brief but clear description of the activities undertaken (family visits, discussions with teachers, meetings and so on). Whenever the situation of a child or specific family is under discussion, write down the number of the corresponding sheet in the educational and family background folder (see below). Whenever a meeting is held, write down the corresponding number in the report folder.

Regularly updating this kind of diary may initially seem rather an effort, but you will soon get used to the system; it will save time in the medium term, enabling you to locate all the necessary information more easily and to draft the reports requested by your supervisory authority without any difficulty.

- **a report folder**

If your work is to be effective, it is very important to write up a report at the end of each meeting. You should include the date, time and participants, the agenda, the main ideas that emerged during the discussion and the conclusions reached or decisions taken.

Put a copy of each report in this folder, keeping the meeting reports in chronological order. To locate the information more easily, you can use different colours for meetings with the community, meetings with teachers and joint meetings. You can also insert dividers for each term, for example.

- **an educational and family background folder**

This tool will help you store relevant information, particularly on struggling children and families. The folder will contain a

sheet for each child. It is best to keep the sheets in alphabetical order.

Information on the child's educational circumstances will be listed on each sheet, along with information about his or her family background, which you will obtain from visits to the community and discussions with parents and other members of the community.

Don't forget that this information must be kept confidential, and discussed only with teachers and other people working with the child, as well as family members. It will be invaluable when it comes to analysing the initial situation at the start of the school year and evaluating the progress made.

- **a contract with school management**

This document should be drawn up on taking up your post within the school, and reviewed whenever any significant change takes place (a change of management, for example). Even if the authority employing you provides a detailed list of the duties associated with your post, it is still essential.

The contract should include specific duties and stipulate your position in the administrative set-up (for example, to whom you have to submit reports, and who is entitled to supervise/evaluate or responsible for supervising/evaluating your work). However, it will also specify the responsibilities of school management and the entire teaching staff in relation to your work, how any conflict situations or disagreements are to be handled, and a number of basic indicators allowing an annual evaluation of the quality of your relationship with school management.

Ideally, the person heading the school's management team will play an active role in drawing up this document, possibly in conjunction with another key person (inspector directly responsible, head of a Roma NGO working with the school, local authority representative, etc.).

- **an action plan**

As explained above, you will be able to work effectively if you manage to involve both members of the community and teachers and to suggest and implement practical measures designed to improve the educational situation of Roma children. Accordingly, after the initial meetings, you should draw up an action plan which, as well as including your own intentions, also sets out what parents, other members of the community, teachers and representatives of the various other institutions have undertaken to do.

The action plan may be drawn up in different ways, but should include the following:

| Description of activity | Timeframe | Person responsible | Partners | Other comments |
|-------------------------|-----------|--------------------|----------|----------------|
|                         |           |                    |          |                |

It is important to describe the activities clearly and in as much detail as possible, to distribute the action plan to all concerned and to refer to it at each subsequent meeting, as well as during the evaluation phase.

- **a contact list**

Your work will involve interaction with many other people and institutions. It is clearly important to note the names, addresses and telephone numbers of everyone you work with, regardless of whether they are from the Roma community or the school, or employed by other relevant institutions.

Noting names and contact details does not suffice, however. You should write down comments about each person so that you can then use the information to ensure the success of future work. In the case of members of Roma communities, it is worth noting, for example, whether they have any special relationships (relative, friendship, conflict) with other individuals or families or whether they have had particular life experiences. In the case of teachers and employees of NGOs or

local institutions, in addition to this kind of personal information, don't forget to specify their position in the institutional set-up, their precise role, their responsibilities and any relationships they may have with other key institutions.

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