

# Education of Roma/Gypsy children in Europe

## The training of Roma school mediators and assistants





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**The training of Roma/Gypsy school mediators and assistants**

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## **The training of Roma school mediators and assistants in Europe**

### **1. Introduction**

Although cultural and socio-economic contexts vary widely, the schooling of Roma/Gypsy children raises a whole series of problems in all the countries of Europe: limited access to schooling, patchy attendance, dropping-out, marginalisation and discrimination in schools, poor marks or failure - these are only some of the commonest.

For many years already, the various European countries have been devising measures, and indeed strategies and action plans, to improve the situation of Roma/Gypsies, and schooling has always been one of the chief items in this context. Several international organisations, with the Council of Europe one of the most active, have also produced documents on this question. In Recommendation No. R(2000)4 on the education of Roma/Gypsy children in Europe, for example, the Committee of Ministers notes that “the problems faced by Roma/Gypsies in the field of schooling are largely the result of longstanding educational policies of the past, which led either to assimilation or to segregation of all Roma/Gypsy children at school on the grounds that they were ‘socially and culturally handicapped’”, and that there was an urgent need to define and implement active measures to ensure genuinely equal schooling opportunities, within the broader context of local support policies for Roma/Gypsy communities.

The fact that the Council of Europe’s Directorate of Education is currently running a project on the schooling of Roma/Gypsy children is certainly an acknowledgment and a confirmation of the question’s importance and topicality.

Teacher training is a key element in any action taken to improve the school system and increase its capacity to meet the needs of children and communities. There are also, however - particularly in the case of groups with special educational requirements - other staff who play a crucial role, but whose training does not get the attention it merits. In the context of schooling for Roma/Gypsy children, this applies to Roma

school mediators/assistants, who have (particularly since the 1990s) emerged as a distinct professional group in several countries .

This report looks at the current position of Roma school mediators/assistants in a number of European countries, and makes various points concerning their role, professional status and training - points which emerged from an international seminar organised in Timisoara (Romania) from 1 to 4 April 2004 by the Council of Europe and the Timisoara Intercultural Institute<sup>1</sup>, with support from the Romanian education authorities<sup>2</sup>.

The first section of the report clarifies terms, since “assistant” and “mediator” mean different things in different countries, and then sets out, on this basis, to analyse the possible roles of Roma/Gypsy mediators and assistants, their profile and the kind of work they are required to do.

The second section reviews and analyses several approaches to the institutional and professional status of Roma/Gypsy mediators/assistants, while the third considers training programmes for them, on the basis of two case studies and other papers presented at the seminar.

The last section takes up the main conclusions and recommendations which emerged from the discussions held, and comparative analyses carried out, by the working groups at the Timisoara seminar. As suggested by the seminar participants, we shall speak of “Roma”, and not “Roma/Gypsies”, from now on. This will make the report easier to read, and is also closer to the real situation in most of the countries represented at the seminar.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.intercultural.ro](http://www.intercultural.ro)

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education and Research, Schools Inspectorate of the Timis region and Timis Teachers’ Association.



## **2. The role of Roma school mediators/assistants**

### ***2.1. Two amorphous concepts: Roma school mediators and assistants***

The idea of using people from Roma communities to give Roma children easier access to schools, and improve their chances of succeeding when they get there, accords with the more general principle of encouraging members of those communities to play a direct part in finding and implementing solutions to their problems. Jean-Pierre Liégeois calls this “relying on the community’s internal dynamism”. First put forward over ten years ago, this idea is now applied in several countries – which means that we are no longer dealing simply with theoretical schemes and visions of the future. Thanks to practical experience gained in a number of countries, we now have sufficient information to envisage solutions which are not just realistic, but realisable. This experience must now be analysed and assessed, with a view to formulating, for policy-makers, proposals on viable measures which are genuinely likely to produce positive long-term results. Although various countries have been applying this general idea successfully for several years, approaches and concepts still differ.

Two basic concepts - “Roma school mediators” and “Roma school assistants” - are actually used in this context, and their meaning needs to be clarified. Other terms used are “Roma mediator” and “Roma assistant”, which do not refer directly to schools, and “Roma teaching assistant” and “Lernhelfer”, which do.

Simplifying, one could speak of two different, but complementary approaches:

- Roma school assistants, who operate mainly in schools and classrooms, and help teachers to organise the teaching process; their work is similar to, and based on, that done by the support teachers or teaching assistants who help children with special needs to integrate within the school system;

- Roma school mediators, who operate mainly in the community, and liaise between schools and the Roma community; their work is similar to, and based on, that done by social workers or community mediators.

The real situation is more complex, however. A survey of job-titles and roles shows that there are many similarities, but also differences, between countries – and that terms and functions are often combined in ways which do not follow this simple pattern. The following account is not exhaustive, but gives a good idea of the approaches adopted in various parts of Europe.

## ***2.2. The role of Roma school mediators/assistants in various European countries***

Spain, Finland and the Czech Republic were among the first countries to use members of the Roma communities to improve Roma children's chances of succeeding at school.

In the 1980s, for example, **Andalusia** already had some 100 Roma/Gypsy monitors/mediators, who monitored schooling, and liaised between teachers and families, schools and homes, for the purpose of reducing absenteeism, which topped 50% in some provinces.

In the 1990s, **Finland** employed Roma/Gypsy social workers and mediators, who helped to settle various problems (educational, linguistic, legal, etc.).

The **Czech Republic** has Roma teaching assistants, who have been operating in schools since the early 1990s, and are mainly concerned with facilitating communication between teachers and Roma children, and helping the latter in the classroom. In addition to providing direct support for the teaching process, they mediate between families and schools.

**Slovakia** also has Roma teaching assistants. They operate in three main areas: (1) the actual teaching process, (2) the leisure activities of Roma children and (3) co-operation with families. They also work with public authorities, non-governmental organisations and churches, and with Roma activists and mediators/assistants. They help to identify the

needs of local Roma communities and plan projects for them. More specifically, their work in these three areas involves:

1. In connection with the teaching process:

- working directly with teachers and other school staff;
- helping children from underprivileged backgrounds to adjust to a new learning environment and overcome linguistic, cultural and social barriers (communicating with children in their mother language);
- helping to set up personalised programmes to develop Roma children's skills;
- organising learning activities for children, including children with special educational needs;
- providing specific cultural input;
- carrying out educational tasks assigned to them by teachers;
- preparing learning materials;
- supervising children during breaks;
- attending teachers' meetings;
- using children's natural openness to stimulate mutual understanding and appreciation of other cultures.

2. In connection with leisure activities:

- working with teaching staff who run school clubs;
- co-ordinating or supporting extra-curricular arts activities (singing, music, dance, visual arts, drama, etc.);
- organising visits to historic and cultural monuments;
- organising participation in social activities at regional level;
- organising social activities for parents;
- working with school staff on out-of-school educational activities and holiday activities;
- promoting positive social interaction;
- providing guidance and support for all these activities, and representing Roma culture.

3. Working with families:

- visiting families, particularly those living in underprivileged neighbourhoods, to assess parents' social environment and attitudes, and also children's health;

- organising meetings and working with parents, to involve them more closely in the schooling process;
- providing information for families and making them realise the importance of pre-school education;
- promoting tolerance and the overcoming of prejudice, as well as contacts between Roma and non-Roma parents and children;
- arranging special activities for Roma mothers.

In the **United Kingdom**, the education authorities have set up school support services for travellers. These provide specialists to advise schools and teachers on integrating travellers' children successfully, and to facilitate communication between parents and schools.

The **Austrian** organisation, Romano Centro, has been using student volunteers to help Roma children with their homework for the last nine years. They originally worked with groups of Roma children in the afternoon, but this approach failed, and they now help children at home. These "Lernhelfer" encourage Roma children to go to school and help them to get better results, but work outside schools and have no direct contact with teachers.

The Institute for an Open Society, and the network of foundations and organisations established and supported by George Soros in the **countries of central, eastern and south-east Europe**, also use Roma school or community mediators, and Roma teaching assistants. Roma assistants are involved, for example, in the "Step-by-Step" programme for primary classes, where they give Roma language and culture a foothold in schools, and help children to make a connection between their own and the classroom language. They function as co-teachers, helping teachers to personalise lessons, and organising small working groups in co-operation with teachers.

Roma assistants are more recent in **Poland**, where they were first employed on a pilot scheme in the Małopolska region in 2001. This led on to the government programme for Roma, adopted in 2003, which provides for support teachers in classes with Roma children and for Roma assistants. Assistants, who are trusted by the local Roma community, have the task of helping Roma children to communicate at school, giving schools a positive image and stressing the benefits of education, providing psychological support for Roma children, helping teachers working with Roma children, promoting the Roma language and

culture in schools, monitoring attendance and performance, identifying the problems and talents of Roma children, helping schools and families to communicate and mediating in conflicts, telling Roma parents about teacher-parent meetings and encouraging them to attend and generally participate in the life of the school (e.g. out-of-school activities - excursions, visits, cultural events, etc.), and identifying family and financial problems which may make it harder for Roma children to learn. They also provide pupils and teachers with information on Roma culture and its special features.

In **Bulgaria**, Roma assistants were first used experimentally by NGOs, but the Ministry of Education has recently adopted this approach, particularly in connection with measures to prevent segregation and give Roma children easier access to pre-school education. Ministry documents speak of Roma teaching assistants at pre-school and school level. They help Roma children to adjust to school, act as go-betweens, help Roma and non-Roma children to communicate, and facilitate contacts between Roma parents and teachers.

In **Croatia**, Roma assistants were first used experimentally in 2000. They have been officially provided for in the national programme for Roma since 2003, and 18 assistants have now been appointed by the Ministry. Assistants divide their time between schools, where they help teachers and pupils, and the community. In schools, they ensure that Roma children attend regularly, meet the school's requirements and master the curriculum. They co-operate with teachers in monitoring Roma children's progress, and help them when necessary - particularly with language problems. In the community, they monitor Roma children's arrival at school in the morning and departure in the evening, liaise with parents, co-operate with social services working for Roma and help children with their homework, providing extra coaching when necessary.

**Romania** has "Roma school mediators", who were introduced - with "Roma health mediators" - in the mid-1990s. They have no classroom involvement and are concerned with relations between schools, Roma children's families and the whole local Roma community. Their duties, as defined by the Ministry of Education, are:

- supporting the schooling of Roma children at all levels;
- facilitating the holding of meetings with Roma parents;

- working with Roma and non-Roma NGOs;
- helping to keep school attendance figures;
- identifying possible future teachers among young Roma;
- reporting, and mediating in, conflicts between and within communities;
- providing the community with information on measures concerning the schooling of Roma children;
- encouraging parents to participate in their children's schooling and in the life of schools;
- informing schools and the authorities of any special problems which arise in the community.

### **2.3. Comparative analysis and implications for practice**

The use made of Roma school mediators/assistants, and the roles and responsibilities assigned to them, certainly depend to a large extent on the problems which arise with schooling of Roma children in a given context. Depending on situations and priorities, mediators/assistants must focus on such objectives as:

- making sure that children go to school
- preventing them from dropping out
- helping them to succeed at school.

Obviously, when attendance as such is not a problem, mediators/assistants can concentrate on identifying the reasons which make children drop out, and improving their chances of succeeding at school. On the other hand, if access to schooling, or local or Roma opposition, are problems, mediators/assistants will have to tackle them with the two partners concerned - schools and the community.

One serious problem remains: if their duties are not well-defined, mediators/assistants are in danger of becoming over-dependent on their direct employers; on the other hand, if their roles are too clearly defined, they may find it hard to respond to the Roma community's widely varying situations and requirements.

Another factor which significantly affects the role and profile of mediators/assistants is the availability (or otherwise) of Roma with the necessary level of training or schooling. Mediators/assistants may be

recruited from the local community, or may be outside professionals - but they must always be of Roma origin and speak the local community's language.

Local recruits have the advantage of being thoroughly familiar with the local community's situation and structure, but they often require more training, and it is difficult to find - particularly in the least privileged communities (i.e. those which need mediators most) - people with the requisite profile.

The advantage of outside professionals is that they have special training, but there is a danger that the local community will not accept them, and that they will have to spend more time familiarising themselves with the community, its relationships, traditions and present situation. It is often hard, too, to persuade qualified people to move and work in an under-privileged Roma community. A halfway solution might be to employ a local who is of Roma origin, but does not belong to the under-privileged group. Depending on the local context, this solution may have the advantages, and also the drawbacks, of the two other options.

Given the complexity and extent of the socio-economic and intercultural problems faced by many Roma communities, it is easy to fall into the trap of giving mediators/assistants too much to do. For example, Roma school assistants, who do all the many things we have listed, may find it hard to discharge the educational tasks assigned to them by a teacher (or even several teachers), as well as other tasks concerning the community and its relations with the school. Similarly, school mediators dealing with socio-economic problems cannot be all things to all members of the local Roma community – and their community involvement may affect their work in schools. There is also a danger that the demands made on them - by the Roma community, schools and local authorities - may exceed their real abilities and capacity for action.

Normally, the presence of Roma schools mediators/assistants is justified by the fact that they are doing something which no other professionals are doing, while being - and being seen as - Roma increases their chances of doing it successfully. Experience gained in several countries shows, however, that confusion and overlapping are common dangers. For example, a school mediator can easily trespass on a social worker's patch.

Other types of confusion are a danger too. For example, mediators may be seen, or see themselves, not as speaking for schools to the community, or as a neutral factor for balance between them, but as speaking for Roma to schools and local authorities. Further complications arise, when they act, not just as the Roma community's spokesman, but also as its leader. The mediator's abilities, official connections and knowledge of the community can obviously be an important source of power at local level – and he/she may eventually decide to exploit this, possibly for political purposes.

The best way to avert these dangers is to start by forming a clear idea of the various functions which mediators/assistants can fulfil, deciding which to choose, and framing principles to fit them. The next stage is to decide what skills they require, and which activities they cover.

Roma school assistants normally have two main functions :

- in consultation with teachers, to give Roma children extra help with classroom work, homework and out-of-school activities (this function is strictly educational);
- to facilitate communication between schools and families.

School mediators also have several distinct functions:

- to facilitate communication between schools, families and the Roma community;
- to brief the community on measures to facilitate access to schooling, and on the procedures for availing of them;
- to forestall conflicts with the help of consciousness-raising and information campaigns in schools and the community, and meetings between teachers, parents and other community representatives;
- to mediate in conflicts.

Both assistants and mediators can also be said to have another, identity-related function. This can manifest itself, explicitly or implicitly, in at least three ways.

Firstly, the mere fact of being Roma and being employed by the school may make the mediator/assistant a positive model for Roma children,



and help to boost the self-esteem of members of the local Roma community.

Secondly, if the community sees schooling as a threat to its identity, the mediator/assistant provides living proof that working within the school system does not rob a person of his/her cultural identity.

Thirdly, if past assimilation policies and/or persecution have made Roma reluctant to affirm their ethnic and cultural identity in public, the mediator/assistant shows them that schools' attitudes have changed, and that they can do so with confidence.

All these functions are sufficiently broad to be easily tailored to specific contexts. Whatever their function, mediators/assistants must always take the right of Roma children to high-quality schooling as their starting point, try to counter the handicaps they suffer, and put schools and the Roma community on the same level. The aim is a balanced, reciprocal relationship, moving steadily towards a fair and dynamic partnership to the benefit of Roma children.

To perform these functions effectively in accordance with the stated principles, Roma mediators/assistants need suitable basic and continued training, practical working instruments, and also an institutional framework which encourages them to apply those principles in their work.

### **3. Institutional and professional status of Roma school mediators/assistants**

#### ***3.1. Types of institutional status of Roma school mediators/assistants***

A survey of the current situation of Roma school mediators/assistants shows that they can have several types of institutional status:

- they may be employed within the school system as auxiliary teaching staff;
- they may be employed by local or regional authorities;
- they may be employed by Roma NGOs or NGOs running projects for Roma.

In most cases, Roma school assistants are part of the school system, but their status within it varies. In some countries, such as the Czech Republic or Slovakia, which have had them longer, they are provided for in law and employed by schools, at the principal's request, in accordance with certain criteria. In others, such as Poland or Croatia, they are employed on special programmes run by education ministries.

Roma NGOs and NGOs working for Roma have played a basic part in promoting Roma school mediators/assistants. In many countries, they launched the pilot projects, ran the first training courses and employed the first assistants or mediators. Inspired by the success of these civil society initiatives, governments – and, more particularly, education ministries - took over the idea, made it permanent and greatly increased its impact by making assistants/mediators part of the school system.

This process of taking Roma school mediators/assistants into national or local authority employment was strongly encouraged, in some central and south-European countries, by their preparations for EU membership and their adoption, in this context, of national strategies for Roma and large-scale projects co-funded by the European Commission.

### ***3.2. Example: the place of school mediators in education policies for Roma in Romania***

Romania provides an interesting example of a complex schooling policy for Roma, involving school mediators. The latter are indeed mediators, and not school assistants, since they are - unlike their counterparts in other countries – exclusively concerned with relations between schools and the Roma community, as detailed in the previous section.

Roma school mediators were first used experimentally by a few Roma associations and by *Médecins sans frontières* in 1995-1996. The first project embodying a more systematic approach to employing and training them was run from 1996 to 1998, with backing from the Council of Europe's confidence-building measures programme. It was jointly co-ordinated by the Timisoara Intercultural Institute and the Roma organisation, CRISS, and supported by the Institute of Educational Science in Bucharest, and the Centre for Gypsy Research and the *Groupement des retraités éducateurs sans frontières* in France. Trial

schemes in a number of Roma communities in various parts of Romania showed that mediators were useful, made it clear that their role needed to be distinguished from that of teachers or social workers, and helped to identify their training needs.

The Ministry of Education gave Roma school mediators professional recognition, and authorised schools to use them. However, schools and education authorities were given no funds for this purpose, and mediators were used only on projects launched and supervised by NGOs. It was only in the school year 2003-2004 that the authorities decided to employ them, initially under a PHARE project, covering ten regions and co-ordinated by the Ministry of Education. When this project ends, they will be wholly employed by the authorities, and this will give them a stable institutional framework for the first time. Similarly, in the next two school years, employment of mediators on this basis will be extended to all the regions.

However, mediators are not the only Roma working within the school system, and the fact that they are not involved in teaching does not mean that no Roma play a part in that process. On the contrary, lessons on the Romany language and certain aspects of Roma culture are another important part of the measures taken for Roma – and are given by specially trained Roma teachers.

In fact, all Romania's national minorities are entitled to be taught, or taught in, their mother language. Prejudice was responsible for the fact that, for some years, Roma were deprived of this right in practice. It was argued that there were not enough Roma qualified and willing to work in schools, that the different dialects spoken by different communities (and the fact that some no longer spoke Romany at all) made the whole exercise pointless, and that parents, pupils and Roma representatives would oppose the idea of spending several extra hours a week on Roma language and culture. Starting in 1998, these prejudices were swept aside by courageous action on the part of the Ministry of Education, prompted by Professor Gheorghe Sarau, a linguist specialising in Romany and the Ministry's inspector for Roma. The measures, implemented with support from several NGOs and UNICEF, covered the training of Roma teachers to teach Romany and Roma culture, and practical arrangements for introducing these subjects in the various parts of the country.

Two kinds of action helped to ensure that a considerable number of teachers of Romany, mainly of Roma origin, became available in the space of a few years. First of all, places were reserved for young Roma at universities, teacher training colleges and higher secondary schools (affirmative action). Secondly, recognised training and diploma courses were introduced. These include intensive training at summer schools and distant-study courses, which students can take while they teach. Scholarships are available for young Roma wishing to follow them.

A very important part in implementing the various measures taken for Roma is played by the inspectors for Roma who have been appointed to all the regional school inspectorates. Mostly of Roma origin, they are responsible for co-ordinating the teaching of Romany and Roma culture, and for implementing policies designed to give Roma children easier access to high-quality schooling.

Roma school mediators are employed by schools with a significant number of Roma pupils, where non-attendance, dropping out and failure are problems. In carrying out the tasks listed in the previous section, they co-operate, not just with school management, teachers, Roma parents and members of the local Roma community, but also with the Romany language teacher (if there is one) and the inspector for Roma. They follow training courses with mediators working in other communities (with whom contacts are encouraged) and this helps to improve the quality of their work and boosts their confidence that lasting, positive changes can be achieved. It is worth noting that part of their job is to spot young Roma who might make good teachers, and could take advantage of the affirmative-action measures to join the school system.

### ***3.3. Professional recognition of Roma school mediators/assistants – problems and solutions***

The current trend at European level is towards recognition of Roma school mediators/assistants as an integral part of school systems. This undoubtedly has positive effects on their work and impact in schools, and it also improves the prospects for going beyond the pilot phase and framing a definite policy on employing mediators/assistants to meet regional and national needs in the country concerned. Roma mediators/assistants who are employed by local authorities may be seen as external to the school, and this may complicate relations with school

management and teachers (obviously, this does not apply in countries where all school staff are employed by local authorities).

In general, to make the work of mediators/assistants genuinely effective, and avoid strengthening the impression that they are treated differently (or even fuelling anti-Roma prejudice), everything should be done to make their status as close as possible to that of other staff.

They should thus, as school system employees, have stable work contracts, running for an indefinite period or for several years, since annual or short-term contracts reduce motivation and may make their situation inferior to that of other staff. Their salaries should also be comparable.

There may be another risk in the case of Roma teaching assistants, who are officially subordinate to teachers (this does not apply to Romany language teachers, who have the same status as other teachers, and work with school mediators). One answer might be for schools to set up teams, with teachers, principals and mediators/assistants working together on the basis of reciprocity and respect for one another's skills and responsibilities.

Romania's experience of Roma school mediators/assistants, and also health mediators, shows that, in addition to recognising them and their work in the community officially, the authorities must give them freedom to act independently within limits specified in their contracts.

There are several ways of ensuring that assistants/mediators are neither excessively subservient to school management nor unduly dependent on local community leaders. For example, making them answerable both to school management and the inspector for Roma may reduce the school's power, and allow them to voice any disagreement openly. Similarly, when assistants/mediators start work, the inspector, or some other official with similar responsibilities, might call a staff meeting and explain what their functions and tasks are. One of those tasks should be, on starting work, to reach an agreement with school management, all school staff and representatives of the local Roma community on their role and on the communication rules which must be respected to forestall conflict and ensure that the views and interests of all sides are respected. Maximum clarification of mediators' specific duties, and also the

administrative and practical procedures they are bound to follow, might also do much to protect them.

Publication of an official guide for mediators/assistants might well shield them from excessive outside influence, and would also improve the quality of their work and provide a point of reference for monitoring and assessment.

Recruitment/selection of Roma school assistants/mediators is another important issue. The regional or national authorities must lay down basic criteria to keep the procedure objective – but schools must also be given enough flexibility to employ the person best suited to the local Roma community's needs.

Conditions for the creation of assistant/mediator posts in schools are another issue. Some countries have fairly precise criteria on this, while others leave the education authorities to decide. In Slovakia, for example, an assistant teacher's post may be created at the principal's request in schools with more than five "underprivileged" pupils, and it is recommended that assistants cater for not more than 20 children. However, all of this remains an open question in many countries, where assistants/mediators are still employed on special programmes by education ministries, and generalisation of the scheme is envisaged in the next few years.

Differences between national conceptions of the role of Roma assistants/mediators must also be considered. Some countries insist, for example, that assistants/mediators must be Roma, and work for the Roma community, while others speak of underprivileged communities and children, without being more specific. These latter countries insist on fair and equal treatment, and emphasise the danger that affirmative action may deepen the divide between groups and actually make intercultural communication more difficult. Countries which single out the Roma as beneficiaries and co-implementers of these measures, on the other hand, argue that there are significant discrepancies between Roma and the rest of the community, and that no other group in Europe has suffered more from oppression, enforced assimilation and exclusion. Moreover, affirmative action for Roma in the education field has already proved its effectiveness, e.g. in Romania, where places are reserved for Roma in upper secondary schools and universities.

There is another question, however: how can the need to give Roma mediators/assistants stable professional status be reconciled with the temporary nature of the affirmative action policies which underlie their appointment? And then there is the paradox that doing their job well ultimately removes their *raison d'être* – another threat to the stability of their position. It is certainly true that affirmative measures are temporary by definition - but their justification holds until the gap between Roma and the rest of the community is closed. The experience of countries which have had special measures for Roma for some time shows that this is a long-term process, and that mediators/assistants have to work for several years before Roma pupils' attendance and results are similar to those of other children. Moreover, the need for mediators/assistants in the countries concerned is sufficient to make this a genuine job option for many Roma in the years ahead. It is also true that the training provided, although geared to the needs and problems of a specific group, can open the door to a vast range of other employment opportunities.

## **4. The training of Roma school mediators/assistants**

### ***4.1. Two examples of training programmes: Roma teaching assistants in Slovakia and Roma school mediators in Romania***

#### **The training of teaching assistants in Slovakia**

Under Slovakia's Education Act, teaching assistants must have either an appropriate university degree or a general secondary or university education, supplemented by teacher training. Until 2010, people with basic or secondary vocational training may also work as teaching assistants, provided that they take a course approved by the Ministry of Education.

There are currently four such courses, which are run by NGOs with experience in this field and comprise between 118 and 160 hours' training. They cover the basics of teaching and the psychology of learning, and also such themes as:

- pupil-centred teaching;
- the basics of communication;
- creating an inclusive climate in the classroom;

- the distinctive sociocultural features of Roma (historical, ethnographic and sociological);
- managing classes and creating a positive learning environment;
- approaches to personalised learning;
- school and community – partnership with parents.

One course is more focused on work with the community, while another also trains teachers to work with Roma teaching assistants.

In recent years, several PHARE projects on schooling for Roma, run by the Ministry of Education with the European Commission's support, have helped to devise and test training and methodological documentation modules for Roma teaching assistants. Part of this work also covers the planning of suitable university training for teaching assistants.

As well as covering educational and methodological concepts, these training modules comprise a whole series of methods and instruments which assistants can apply in their later work with Roma children and their parents, and with school personnel. Most of the themes listed above are dealt with, but others are added, e.g.:

- the formulation of thematic and personalised plans;
- methods for use in monitoring children's development;
- the significance of play for learning at pre-school level;
- strategies for effective communication with families.

Another important element in training is the development of inter-cultural communication skills, and the ability to promote Roma ethnic and cultural identity, for the purpose of combating prejudice and encouraging tolerance.

The PHARE materials and methodological guidelines will remain in use once the PHARE projects are completed, since the state will then be transferring responsibility for the training of Roma teaching assistants to the appropriate public authorities.



## **A training programme for Roma school mediators in Romania**

The PHARE project to give the children of underprivileged groups, and particularly Roma, better access to schooling, which the Ministry of Education is running in 2003-2004, marks the start of a move away from ad hoc, short-term training programmes, run by NGOs, to an institutionalised, longer-term programme, recognised by the school system.

Planning and implementing a training course for Roma school mediators was part of the project<sup>3</sup>. This course, which totals 1,500 hours and runs for 28 weeks, covers three types of training :

- theoretical training in a training centre (336 hours);
- work-place training (in the school where the mediator works) (504 hours);
- individual training by tutors (660 hours).

There is also a 30-hour assessment and accreditation module.

The skills which this course sets out to develop match the job description for Roma schools mediators given in section 2 above. The aim is to give Roma school mediators the ability to :

- recognise problems and situations which may make it hard for Roma children to attend school regularly, and inform the school of them;
- provide families with advice and guidance on access to social and educational facilities, and on the institutions which run them;
- communicate effectively with various interlocutors;
- mediate when problems arise in schools or families;
- work as part of a team with school management, teaching staff and members of the community;
- promote the values of multiculturalism, inclusion and equal opportunity, both in schools and in the community;
- help underprivileged pupils to overcome obstacles to full realisation of their potential.

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<sup>3</sup> Run by the Teacher Training College in Cluj.

There are two elements in the curriculum: basic training and add-on modules, which can be tailored to the specific needs of individuals and local communities.

Basic training covers seven themes :

- role of schools mediators: co-operative skills;
- inclusive education;
- conflict prevention, mediation and resolution; help and guidance;
- community development; community negotiation and mediation;
- Roma language, literature and culture;
- “European computer users’ driving licence”;
- communication, active listening, public speaking, presentation of information.

The add-on modules cover such things as :

- legal protection of children;
- learning problems;
- social, emotional and behavioural problems;
- training for Roma parents and families;

Work-place training covers tasks in which trainees have to apply the skills and strategies they have learned at the training centre :

- learning about the school and community;
- analysing the needs of the school and community;
- planning action in the school and community;
- assessing and optimising that action.

The individual training plan supplements these two types of training, and is prepared and implemented by the trainee in consultation with his/her tutor (normally an experienced mediator) and school management. Special attention is paid to developing his/her ability to apply the methods and instruments recommended in theoretical training.

#### ***4.2. Analysis: training needs and provision – comparison with real situation***

The two examples of training we have given illustrate the current trend towards promoting high-quality training, which matches job requirements, is provided by qualified specialists in recognised institutions, and prepares trainees to face real-life challenges, while giving them genuine employment prospects. These schemes are among the most advanced in Europe, but they are recent - and have yet to prove their worth in practice.

The training provided for Roma mediators/assistants in other countries is based on seminars, which cover similar ground, but in a far shorter time. Its main drawback is the difficulty of getting it professionally recognised. But it can have advantages too – it can, for example, be more flexible, and more easily adjusted to meet the practical needs of trainees. Methodologically, it combines formal lectures with interactive activities, group work, and discussion between trainees. This interactive dimension, based on discussion and analysis of real-life practices and situations, is certainly important and particularly well suited to the type of work done by mediators/assistants.

In terms of results and later employment prospects, longer training in recognised educational institutions, e.g. teacher training colleges or universities, is probably the best answer. Its value and effectiveness increase if, as in Romania, it combines conventional training with work-place training and supervision by a tutor. The intention is to include such training (planned and tested within the PHARE project) among the standard basic courses provided at teacher training colleges. However, the cost of this training is fairly high – particularly for people from underprivileged communities – and it is not yet clear how it will be covered. Government grants for the training of mediators/assistants might be one solution. This is Croatia's approach, for example, but its experience shows that finding people with the right profile, who want to train as mediators/assistants, and can leave their families and communities for an extended period, is not always easy. On the other hand, it may provide interesting opportunities for young people who want to study, and are ready to work as mediators/assistants in their own community or other communities with similar needs.

Working as a school mediator might also appeal to people for whom long-term training would pose problems. Another option, which would mitigate the drawbacks, and keep the advantages, of short-term training, might be to make this one of the diploma/vocational training courses run by employment agencies. Such training would be provided outside the school system, but could easily involve specialists and practitioners working within the school system as trainers, and include on-the-job monitoring. It would also lead to a recognised diploma, giving direct access to employment. The only condition for providing this option, in addition to basic training, would be effective co-operation between the education and vocational training authorities.

Finally, a third option might involve combining short-term training with official recognition of the skills acquired. In fact, many teachers and experienced mediators/assistants make the point that personal qualities, commitment to providing high-quality schooling for Roma children, and informally acquired social and interpersonal skills, are often more important than skills and ideas acquired through academic training. Moreover, skills recognition and certification is a highly topical approach at European level today, and emphasising it might also help to eliminate situations where people who lack the necessary formal qualifications are refused admission to vocational training.

Nearly all the countries concerned have one thing in common today: they need far more mediators/assistants than they have. However, the number needed, and the training they require, have never been precisely estimated – and this makes it impossible to plan and provide the right kind of training.

It is also vital that the growing trend towards professionalisation of training for mediators/assistants should not reduce the involvement of Roma NGOs and other NGOs working in this field, or their co-operation with the education authorities. First of all (we have made this point before), there are many countries where NGOs pioneered such training, and their experience should be used. Secondly, the basic principle of involving Roma actively in planning policies and measures for their communities makes it essential that Roma organisations and NGOs with relevant experience should be permanently consulted by institutions which take over the training of Roma school mediators/assistants. The

former might be asked, for example, to help assess the content and impact of training programmes launched by the various public authorities.

Indeed, training for Roma school mediators/assistants should do more to develop their assessment skills, which can help to encourage high-quality work. Promoting self-assessment techniques is one potentially helpful approach. As facilitators in a self-assessment process, involving school management, teachers, Roma parents and local community representatives, mediators would be better able to promote balance, dialogue and the sharing of responsibilities between school and community. To equip them to do this, however, special modules should be included in training programmes.

## **5. Conclusions and recommendations**

Analysis of the current situation, and of issues relating to the role, professional status and training of Roma school mediators/assistants, shows that this is an area where things are moving fast, and that an important stage has been reached, characterised by two main trends:

- a change of level in countries which have already used mediators/assistants experimentally, where ad hoc NGO initiatives are being replaced by nationwide schemes, run by governments and supported by the European structures ;
- extension of the use of Roma school assistants/mediators to other countries, particularly in central and south-east Europe, through action taken directly within school systems.

The use of people from the Roma community to act as school mediators/assistants, and help Roma children to obtain high-quality schooling on the basis of school/community dialogue and partnership, is now widely accepted, is producing good results, and should be supported and generalised within all European school systems.

At the same time, the use of Roma school mediators/assistants is only a partial solution, and must form part of a coherent package of measures, based on a strategic vision, and covering both the various aspects of the school system and access for Roma to all public services.

Current problems with the use of Roma mediators/assistants in various European countries suggest that more emphasis should be laid on assessment, both of their training and of the impact of their work. Assessment must not be merely quantitative, however - often the sole focus when European projects are reviewed – or concentrate exclusively on the acquisition of knowledge and skills by Roma children. The action taken and results achieved must also be weighed, in qualitative terms, against the basic principles of respect, reciprocity and equality of status and opportunity, to ensure that these schemes do not artificially accentuate cultural differences or develop assimilationist tendencies.

The Council of Europe should continue its efforts to promote that exchange of views and pooling of experience which began at the first international seminar in 1994 and was taken further at the Timisoara seminar in 2004. This might lead to networking of the chief players in this field, and also to the formulation of principles, guidelines and training programmes with a European dimension.

In fact, the work done by Roma school mediators/assistants can be made more effective by giving them, not only high-quality basic training geared to their actual needs, but continued training as well, and by enabling them to contact, and exchange views with, colleagues in their own and other regions and countries.

If the Council of Europe and other European and international organisations keep this question on their agenda, governments will certainly be encouraged to take effective action (possibly inspired by other countries' schemes) in this area, and continue that action when current projects end. At a time when governments are increasingly assuming responsibility for these schemes, the Council of Europe must also insist on the need for them to work with Roma in planning, implementing and assessing policies and practices. It can also provide a forum for regular meetings between government representatives and Roma organisations. A consultation meeting might be convened to assess the desirability of its formulating specific recommendations on the use and training of Roma school mediators/assistants.

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