INCLUSION FROM THE START

Guidelines on inclusive early childhood care and education for Roma children

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UNESCO
Council of Europe

Contents

List of figures, tables and text boxes

Figures

Tables

Text boxes

Foreword

Like other children, Roma children have a right to education. That right is inviolable. It is firmly inscribed in international conventions, human rights treaties and ministers' recommendations, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) and the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers recommendation to member states on the education of Roma/Gypsy children in Europe (2000). The right to education includes, as emphasised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comment No. 7, the young child's right to early childhood care and education services.

Despite the adherence of European countries to such instruments and recommendations, Roma children still greatly suffer from persistent discrimination and exclusion from education. Today, as many as 50% of Roma children in Europe fail to complete primary education; no more than 20-25% attend secondary school, with the vast majority enrolled in vocational education; and less than 1% complete tertiary education. When young Roma children do enter school, they often feel unwelcome and unvalued by their teachers and non-Roma peers. Far too high a proportion of Roma children are placed in special classes within public sector schools, or they are routed to special schools with children with disabilities. Sadly, exclusion, discrimination, segregation, poverty and disempowerment are the norm for many Roma children.

We must act firmly and urgently to change this situation. One strategy with great potential is promoting inclusive early childhood education for Roma children. Access to quality early childhood education – be it in the form of home- or community-based childcare, parenting education and support, or kindergartens and pre-schools – is shown to lay a strong foundation in young children for later well-being, development and learning. It can reduce and prevent social and learning difficulties, as well as disabilities, by ensuring early intervention and support. Equally important, the presence of Roma children in classrooms can nurture, in all young minds and hearts, the importance of living together, and of equal and inclusive treatment for all without distinction.

Inclusion from the start: guidelines on inclusive early childhood care and education for Roma children is the fruit of joint collaboration between the Council of Europe and UNESCO, which are committed to supporting the well-being and flourishing of Roma children and their right to education and development from birth. It is a concrete follow-up to the recommendations arising from an expert meeting on "Toward quality education for Roma children: transition from early childhood to primary education" organised in 2007 by the two bodies. It is hoped that the Guidelines will incite greater attention to, and above all, appropriate actions for, young Roma children by providing clear policy and programmatic pointers to conceiving an inclusive early childhood care and education system.

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

Purpose and audience of the Guidelines

Inclusion from the start: guidelines on inclusive early childhood care and education for Roma children (Guidelines hereafter) is a joint contribution by the Council of Europe and UNESCO to improving access to quality early childhood services for Roma children. They are a concrete follow-up to the recommendations arising from an expert meeting, organised by the two organisations in 2007.[1] Recognising that quality early childhood experience is an important stepping stone toward inclusive participation in school and society, the Guidelines address the challenges specific to Roma children in the early years and transition to primary education. They provide guidance on key themes, such as the conceptualisation of early childhood care and education (ECCE) services, agenda-setting, stakeholders' responsibilities, curricular and pedagogical approaches, staff training and professional development, assessment and transition to primary education.

The Guidelines primarily address formal ECCE services – such as kindergartens and pre-schools – which typically cater for children from ages 3-6 years. The reason for this focus is that providing care and education experience prior to primary school entry is crucial for supporting Roma children's school readiness and for facilitating an equal start in their first year. This being said, the Guidelines also acknowledge the critical importance of the years pre-natal to age 3, and consider health and nutrition interventions and non-formal ECCE programmes (e.g. community-based childcare, parenting education) as essential services in deprived neighbourhoods and settlements.

Terminology

Roma and Romani

The Guidelines seek to comply with the Council of Europe's and UNESCO's adopted usage of the term "Roma",[2] which covers a wide variety of population groups: Sinti, Traveller, Manouches and other groups. For readability purposes, the Guidelines use the adjective "Roma", in particular when referring to the Roma people as a whole or to groups or individuals (e.g. Roma children), and use the adjective "Romani" when referring to languages.

Early childhood care and education

The Guidelines use the term "early childhood care and education" (ECCE) in a broad, holistic sense. ECCE can be provided through a variety of formal, non-formal and

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1. These recommendations are available at unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001611/161164e.pdf, accessed 25 July 2013.
2. Though there have been different terms in use since the 1970s, "Roma" is currently used as a generic name (Council of Europe, 2011).

informal settings. Programmes include home-based and community-based childcare programmes, parenting education programmes, early intervention for young children with developmental delays, crèches, kindergartens and pre-schools.

It should be noted that "education" in the early years includes stimulation, socialisation, guidance, participation, learning and developmental activities, and is considered inseparable from the concept of "care". The term "early education" as used in these Guidelines recognises that meaningful education can be achieved only in the presence of warm supportive relationships with adults who are attentive to the health, nutrition and well-being of the children in their care.

Structure of the Guidelines

The Guidelines provide guidance on four key themes pertinent to the care, development and early education of young Roma children. The themes selected are: (1) a national ECCE agenda for Roma children; (2) curriculum and pedagogy; (3) initial education, professional development and support for early childhood practitioners; and (4) transition from home or early childhood programmes to primary education.

Section 1 – What national agenda for young Roma children? – includes:

– basic principles for developing a national ECCE agenda for all children;
– the importance of developing specific but not exclusive goals for Roma children, within the national ECCE agenda. The sub-agenda would include: a greater focus on preventive maternal and infant services during the pre-natal to 3 years period; early inclusion in mainstream ECCE services, at latest by age 4 years; exploring alternative ECCE provision; and supportive monitoring of young Roma children.

Section 2 – What early childhood curriculum and pedagogy for Roma children? – includes guidance on key issues and concerns in:

– developing good curriculum practices;
– considering special emphases in curriculum and pedagogy;
– employing an appropriate early childhood assessment;
– setting standards of welcome for parents.

Section 3 – What training and support for educators to work effectively with Roma children? – includes guidance on:

– key requirements for the training and professional development of and support for early childhood educators working with diverse groups, including Roma children;
– valuing the work of Roma assistants and mediators;
– strengthening school leadership and staff teamwork;
– reinforcing local authority leadership and investment.

Section 4 – What transition from home or early childhood services to primary school for Roma children? – includes guidance on:

– viewing primary school entry as a basic right;
– promoting smooth transition through preparatory programmes;

– working for smooth transition as a shared responsibility between early childhood educators, primary school teachers and policymakers;

– ensuring appropriate assessment at primary school entry.

The Guidelines provide many good practice examples, and suggested reading and resources on the above-mentioned themes.

1. What national agenda for young Roma children?

Key points addressed in this section:

– The general situation of young Roma children in the EU.

– What are some basic principles of a national ECCE agenda?

– How can an effective agenda be designed for young Roma children?

– What particular considerations should be given in elaborating the agenda for young Roma children?

The general situation of young Roma children in the EU

In many European countries, Roma children continue to face poverty, discrimination and exclusion, and are denied a fair start in life. Health data show that Roma children are hospitalised for pneumonia and respiratory illnesses far more frequently than children from mainstream backgrounds (Open Society Foundations, Roma Education Fund, UNICEF, 2012). They are disproportionately affected by low birth weight, poor nutritional status, stunted growth and chronic respiratory and ear infections – all preventable disorders that harm the development and learning potential of young children.

In addition, relatively few Roma children participate in ECCE services. Existing sources suggest that less than 50% of Roma children access ECCE services across Europe before the age of 4 or 5 years – a much lower rate than for children from majority populations. In only a handful of countries does the enrolment of Roma children in pre-school rise above 50% in the year before compulsory schooling.[3] The situation means that in many countries, at least half[4] of Roma children arrive at school without adequate preparation, with many hardly understanding the majority language.

Recent estimates by UNICEF suggest that only one Roma child in every four completes primary education in several central and eastern European countries. By second or third grade, many Roma children lag so far behind other children that they lose motivation to continue their schooling. In addition, a considerable proportion of Roma children are placed in special classes or schools, based on the tests administered at school entry.

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3. According to the World Bank Report (2012), 76% of Roma children are enrolled in pre-school in Hungary, while in Bulgaria only 45%, in Romania 37%, in the Czech Republic 32% and in Slovakia 28% of Roma children aged 3-6 are in pre-school. In Serbia, nearly 50% of Roma are enrolled in the compulsory preparatory pre-school programme for children over 5 years.
4. The phrase "at least half" can be used if the calculation is based on official estimates of Roma populations. However, on-the-ground estimates suggest that significant numbers of Roma children are not being counted.

This practice of educational segregation prevents Roma children from earning a primary school certificate that would allow them to continue into mainstream secondary education.

Secondary school completion for Roma children remains a priority challenge in several European countries. In five out of 11 EU member states surveyed in 2011 (Portugal, Greece, Spain, France and Romania), fewer than one out of 10 Roma pupils completed upper-secondary education according to the 2011 Roma survey. Even in countries where most of the Roma children complete primary school (e.g. in Hungary), the education gap between Roma and non-Roma remains wide. The majority of Roma children end compulsory education without obtaining either a vocational certificate or secondary qualification. Without such qualifications, Roma children have little chance of future employment.

A statistical picture that may provoke negative stereotyping

These statistics may give rise to stereotyping Roma children as being victims of poverty and difficult to educate. This is an image of what Loris Malaguzzi termed the "poor" child, the child in need of continuous help and a potential burden on society. It leaves aside the fact that many Roma families are successful and – more importantly – that all children, whatever their origin, are born with talents and intelligence. Like any other child, the Roma child is a rich child – a child born with great potential, with intelligence and curiosity, an active learner who seeks the meaning of the world from birth. This is "a child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity, …who needs and wants connections with other children and adults; a citizen with a place in society, a subject of rights whom the society must respect and support" (*Children in Europe*, 2008: 6). It is important to recognise that Roma children are capable of succeeding and contributing strongly to society if they are fully accepted by the majority and educated in inclusive early childhood services and schools.

Some basic principles of a national ECCE agenda for young children

When developing a national early childhood agenda, some basic principles need to be ensured, including dialogue and participation, inclusion and equity, and the pursuit of holistic goals.

Dialogue and participation

Dialogue with and the participation of stakeholders is a fundamental principle of early childhood education and care at all levels. At governance level, the central administration will achieve a greater degree of shared ownership and effective implementation if it not only consults about policy documents but also devolves responsibility and adequate funding to local authorities and Roma NGOs, given the proximity of these stakeholders to children and families.

Likewise, where curriculum is concerned, the responsible ministry will set broad developmental and learning goals for young children and define the structural, procedural and pedagogical requirements for these goals to be achieved. At the same time, the administration will show its trust in centres and teachers by encouraging each centre to

develop its own contextual curriculum, based on the national guidelines but interpreted also in terms of the needs and interests of the children and families within the catchment area of the service.

At classroom level, centres and their teachers will also respect the principle of dialogue and participation. While respecting the broad national developmental and learning goals defined by the responsible ministry, the educational practice of teachers will be based primarily on dialogue with children and parents. Teachers will focus on meaning-making about everyday events, relationships and experiences, and encourage children's play and participation. Although subject areas such as emergent literacy, numeracy and rules for living together need to be addressed when the occasion presents itself, the temptation to schoolify services for young children should be resisted in official curricula. This can be achieved on the ground through offering more in-service training to teachers and guidance from pedagogical inspectors or advisors. Research suggests that direct teaching of academic skills to young children is highly subject to "fadeout" and can have negative effects on children´s motivation to learn (Clarke-Stewart & Allhusen, 2005).

Inclusion and equity

All children have the right to good early care and education. To fulfil this right, ECCE programmes should be made inclusive and equitable, that is, every child should be able to access an ECCE service that is welcoming and responsive to her/his characteristics and needs. In particular, states need to ensure this right for the neediest children. In 2007, the Committee on the Rights of the Child:

> … calls on States parties to ensure that all young children (and those with primary responsibility for their well-being) are guaranteed access to appropriate and effective services, including programmes of health, care and education specifically designed to promote their well-being. Particular attention should be paid to the most vulnerable groups of young children and to those who are at risk of discrimination (UNCRC, 2006).

Much is already being done across Europe to improve inclusion mechanisms. For instance, case studies were conducted in 2008 in Cyprus, Finland, Latvia and Spain on inclusionary and exclusionary practices in pre-schools as part of the European Commission's project titled INCLUD-ED. These case studies highlighted characteristics of effective inclusive practices in pre-schools as follows:[5]

– having heterogeneous grouping of children in terms of ethnic background, educational level/ability, gender and age;
– undertaking effective curriculum planning and support for learning, which take into account children's ethnic background and special needs;
– offering individual assistance, especially vis-à-vis children of ethnic minorities and with special needs;
– providing support staff (e.g. Roma teacher assistants) in classroom;
– holding positive expectations about children's abilities and learning, avoiding negative aspirations especially vis-à-vis ethnic minority children;
– preventing inequalities among children with different characteristics early on;

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5. See European Commission, 2011.

–   encouraging parents' participation in decision-making processes and children's learning processes, especially in multicultural contexts;

–   fostering schools actively organising parental involvement and outreach.

To achieve such targets, governments need to provide leadership and investment, to emphasise in the early childhood curriculum (also at primary and secondary levels) that inclusion is a major aim for their society and that kindergartens and schools will give a lead in this effort. Governments will also ensure the universal nature of public education, that is, that public education extends equally to all regions, localities and social classes. The public education system will attempt to strengthen democracy and social integration in a country through bringing together, in mixed classrooms, children from different backgrounds and with different abilities. Learning to live together in diversity is an important goal. Targeted services can stigmatise vulnerable groups, especially when the group has a distinct ethnic or cultural identity. For this reason, it is important that countries provide programmes for Roma children within the mainstream education systems.

A focus on holistic development

The goal of ECCE is to promote young children's holistic development. It should not be confined only to the acquisition of a narrow set of cognitive skills. Specific objectives are expressed differently across countries,[6] but curriculum goals usually contain the following components (NAEYC, 2009; UNESCO, 2006; Naudeau et al., 2011):

–   *Health, physical well-being and motor development*: this goal underlines attention to the health and well-being of young children. It encourages kindergarten systems to provide annual health and dental screening, a daily meal and snacks, a healthy indoors environment for young children, many outdoor activities, and to inculcate self-care abilities in young children in co-operation with their families.

–   *Social and emotional development*: this includes the child's growing knowledge of oneself; self-confidence; self-regulation; co-operation; responsibility; and the ability to participate constructively in groups with other children.

–   *Language development*: language development and communication begins with the self-expression of the child, through what Malaguzzi names "the hundred languages of children". As children mature, language development will include the development of vocabulary and speaking skills, listening and understanding, phonological awareness and eventually the concept of print, play-writing and early letters.

–   *Cognitive development and general knowledge*: this includes the child's ability to think, reason, sort and classify; the ability to seek out, memorise and use new information; and the ability to problem-solve and think critically.

Specific goals for Roma children within the national ECCE agenda

Within the national agenda – but not separate from it – some specific goals for Roma children and other disadvantaged children should be developed. This is because Roma families have additional needs and obstacles to face, due to poverty and discrimination.

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6. See, for example, OECD, 2011.

Explicit but not exclusive targeting should be the rule. UNICEF, for example, has formulated a specific agenda for young Roma children by age group, which could easily be included and evaluated within a national plan for children (see Table 1, below). It involves a package of basic services involving pre-natal and infant health, pre-schools, home-visiting, parent education and support. UNICEF underlines that a comprehensive plan such as this should be planned in consultation with Roma groups and communities, adequately financed and assessed regularly.

Table 1 – A developmental agenda for young Roma children

Developmental stage	Issues to address
A. Conception to birth	Ensuring quality pre- and post-natal health care for mothers and infants within the communities, through visiting health services and the use of Roma bridging personnel. Reasonable family living standards. Counselling for self-care during pregnancy, preparing for delivery, parenting and family planning. Parent education and support.
B. Birth to age 3 years	Birth registration. Communication and counselling for health care, nutrition and feeding, with an emphasis on infant-caregiver interaction; attention to the play, social development and language development of toddlers through providing a responsive, rich and stimulating learning environment.
C. From 3 to 6 years	Access to quality early learning opportunities in public kindergartens; a safe and stimulating environment; qualified providers; a quality curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, interactive; culturally and linguistically sensitive. A centre climate that encourages active parental participation and continuous assessment by educators of programme quality and child development outcomes.
D. From 6 to 8 years	A focus on developmental school readiness; getting schools ready for children; eliminating all forms of segregation, special schools and classrooms; and aiming to encourage families to support their children's learning.

Source: adapted from Open Society Foundations, Roma Education Fund, UNICEF 2012.

The following points are particularly important to consider when planning for services and programmes for young Roma children at different early childhood ages, as indicated in Table 1 and in the discussion below:

– to focus on pre-natal to 3 years with, in particular, comprehensive health and developmental monitoring during the pre-natal and infancy period;

– to ensure the early inclusion of Roma children into mainstream ECCE services;

– to provide early care and education through alternative provision, if mainstream kindergarten services are unavailable or unwelcoming to Roma families;

– to invest in prevention and health monitoring rather than special schools.

A focus on development, pre-natal to 3 years

Attention to the period of pre-natal to 3 years is critical for later health and education. A negative start in life, due, for example, to maternal malnutrition and stress, leads to premature and under-weight births, high infant mortality and general poor health. Early

childhood teachers and practitioners know that hearing and sight problems, lack of energy, frequent colds and ear aches undermine school attendance and the child's ability to learn. These conditions can be prevented through home-visiting and other mother-and-child health services, provided from the pre-natal stage. Again, UNICEF proposes a comprehensive model of early childhood intervention from the pre-natal stage that states and local authorities should strive to provide for children in poor neighbourhoods and settlements:

Figure 1 – A holistic model of early intervention

1. Health and stimulation services that meet children's holistic development needs: vision, hearing, nutrition, behavioural and oral health as well as medical health needs. Maternal health care and parenting education.

4. Early learning opportunities in nurturing families and service environments where children develop holistically – physically, socially and cognitively. Parental participation and support for learning.

Early learning

Maternal health, nutrition, infant health

Family and community support

Early intervention/ special needs

2. Early screening and appropriate services for children with special health care needs, disabilities and/or developmental delays.

3. Economic and parenting supports to ensure children have nurturing and stable relationships with caring adults. Community development, inclusion and earning opportunities for parents. Decent housing, access to public services and benefits.

Source: Open Society Foundations, Roma Education Fund, UNICEF 2012.

As section 3 of Figure 1 proposes, it is crucial during the pre-natal to 3 years period to invest not only in young children but also in parents, especially mothers. The period from pre-natal onwards is the most appropriate moment for visiting health services to provide information and support to mothers: for example, to counsel mothers on self-care during pregnancy; on parenting and family planning; on child-rearing and, in particular, on the importance of language interaction with infants and toddlers.

Education policy makers will also keep in mind that a significant part of language development takes place in the first three years. Figure 2 below shows the impact of family background on the vocabulary levels of children up to 36 months. This is another reason why governments need to invest in low-income families and the education levels of mothers. Research by Hart and Risley (1995) suggests that the number of words (vocabulary) mastered by a child from an affluent family in the United States at the age of three years is more than double that of a child from a low-income family with less educated parents.

Figure 2 – Language and vocabulary growth in the first 3 years
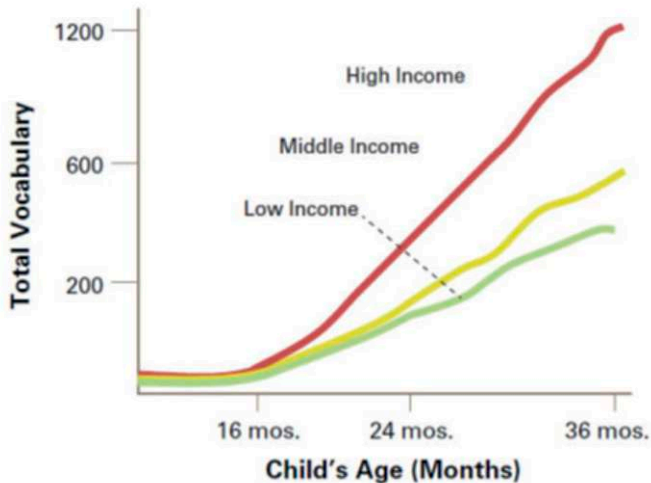
Source: Hart and Risley (1995).

The early inclusion of Roma children into mainstream ECCE

As indicated earlier, the participation rate of Roma children in early childhood education is extremely low. This means that many – perhaps the majority – arrive at school for the first time without a clear idea of school expectations. Many of these children come from second-language or ethno-dialect backgrounds,[7] and may have a very imperfect grasp of the national language used in the school. For this reason, the fourth meeting of the integrated European Platform for Roma Inclusion (Brussels, 13 December 2010) agreed that Roma children should have far greater access to early education to enable them to acquire a good level in the majority language and to transit without difficulty into primary schooling.[8] The second European Roma Summit (Cordoba, 8-9 April 2010) concluded that:

> Member States should seek to ensure that every Roma child should have access to two years of mainstream, quality pre-school education, a service available to almost all other children across Europe.[9]

However, unless early childhood education services are accessible, affordable and welcoming toward Roma children and families, their attendance will remain low. Key features of effective services include the following (further attention to these features is given in later sections):

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7. An ethno-dialect is a version of the official language that may include many Romani words and grammatical constructions.

8. The meeting was co-organised by the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU and the European Commission.

9. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=88&langId=en&eventsId=234&furtherE vents=yes accessed 25 July 2013.

–   the early education service is located close to Roma settlements and is affordable;

–   it ensures a positive and welcoming climate for Roma children and their parents;

–   it focuses on holistic development (for example, through providing food for children, health-screening and other social welfare supports);

–   it is staffed by trained educators, with positive expectations for Roma and other disadvantaged children, and trained to work without bias with such children and their families;

–   it has a good mix of majority and minority children;

–   it has a curriculum that promotes children's well-being, development and learning as well as ensuring the participation of all children and their parents.

**Early care and education through alternative provision,
as a temporary measure**

In many instances, mainstream services are not attractive to Roma families, because of limited possibilities for parental involvement and participation, staff poorly trained in inclusive and intercultural pedagogy, and lack of linguistic and other support necessary for Roma children. In yet other instances, the municipal kindergarten may be too far away or be too costly for extremely poor parents. If this is the case, serious consideration should be given to providing home-based and community-based services[10] for Roma families as a temporary measure. Such services can adopt more flexible rules of attendance, more ample opportunities for parental involvement and more attention to linguistic and cultural factors. Community approaches can also incorporate health-screening and nutritional inputs, and be integrated with family outreach and other vital community services. A working model is provided by Serbia, as in the example below (Box 1).

Box 1 – Development and education centres (DECs) in Serbia

Development and education centres (DECs) were established in 2001 in 10 very poor municipalities in Serbia so as to encourage a strong start in life and smooth transition to primary school for underprivileged children, mainly Roma children. The project was initiated and funded by UNICEF. Following the establishment of the DECs, each municipality established a council for DECs to monitor goals and their progress. Selected professionals – including Roma co-ordinators and assistants – were trained to serve the children and families who were to participate in the centres' activities. The DECs had three programmes: a pre-school programme for children aged 3-6/7, and two programmes providing academic support for older children up to age 16. These programmes adopted child-centred and culturally sensitive methodologies.

The main objective of the pre-school programme was to reduce the barriers that exclude children from participating successfully in education. For example, an

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10. For example, the "A Good Start" project supported by the Roma Education Fund and its partners was successful in enlarging access for Roma children through community-based approaches. However, such approaches are not perceived to be a long-term solution.

emphasis was placed on improving their health and nutrition. Young children were also supported in acquiring the language of instruction as well as basic social, hygiene and routine skills that are essential in making a successful transition to primary school. Older children in the pre-school programme learned basic educational content that was relevant for schooling.* Parents were sought out and encouraged to participate in their children's pre-school education.

One of the reasons behind the success of the project is the fact that stakeholders and partners, including schools, social welfare, health and employment centres, local government and NGOs, meet regularly to co-ordinate efforts. An external evaluation of the project concluded that (1) school absences dropped significantly among the children attending the centres, (2) children involved with the centres did not repeat grades and showed some improvement in academic performance, and (3) teachers' attitudes in regular schools toward the centres' programmes were very positive.** A year after its initiation, the Serbian Ministry of Education accredited the DECs and their programmes are now available in 14 municipalities.

* Drustvo za Unapredivanje Romskih Naselja (DURN), 2008.

** Evaluation Testing and Research Centre, Serbian Ministry of Education and Sport, Roma National Council, Roma Children Centre, 2004: 70.

Another model present in several countries – though not without its critics because of its academic and compensatory focus – is the primary school preparatory class. In this model, a free preparatory class, usually for the duration of the year prior to primary schooling, is provided to Roma and other disadvantaged children in order to enhance their school readiness. These classes are often centred on early literacy and numeracy in the official school language and on familiarising children with the school environment. When these classes are free and provide, in addition, a daily meal to children, they generally improve the enrolment of children from impoverished families.

Yet another alternative model is the creation of family literacy programmes, designed to enhance the literacy of both parents' and their children. In some countries, family literacy interventions appear to produce an important range of benefits that may support long-term child literacy development, such as improving parental self-confidence and the child's self-concept as a reader and learner (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Swain et al., 2009). Such interventions have also been shown to help low-income, migrant mothers, giving them sufficient language mastery to find employment (see example in Box 2).

Box 2 – Examples of alternative approaches from Portugal

In Portugal, two alternative types of provision have been found effective for the inclusion of Roma children in ECCE. One is a home-based approach whereby a pre-school teacher, employed in regular pre-schools, conducts weekly visits to the homes of Roma children where she/he works with a few children and engages their parents in learning activities. This modality has been implemented in rural areas, with positive results.

Leisure-time centres are another model that can provide learning and social activities for pre-school children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including Roma children.

Implanted in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods, these centres allow children to participate at times suitable for the children's families. Parents are welcome to accompany their children and can talk with the staff and raise their concerns wherever they wish. Once they are convinced of the value of the centres for their children, parents tend to continue their participation in the centres' activities.

Source: Interview with the Directorate General for Innovation and Curriculum Development, Portugal, May 2009.

Health prevention and early access to kindergarten rather than special schools

In order to prevent avoidable childhood infections, health services need to monitor the health of Roma children regularly. In most European countries, monitoring normally begins at the pre-natal stage, focusing on maternal health, breast-feeding, nutrition and immunisation. Developmental and language screening is also continued during the toddler years, so as to identify sight, hearing, speech and other developmental issues. This may seem costly but later savings to health and education services are significant, when developmental delays are identified and treated early. However, reports from several countries confirm that Roma mothers and their infants are least likely to be visited by health personnel[11] or have access to public health services.

It is customary also in European countries to provide health checks and screening for developmental delays in the kindergartens. However, in many of the countries with significant Roma populations, Roma children do not necessarily enter kindergarten at 3 years but more generally at 5 or not at all. For health and language reasons, it is essential to increase dramatically the percentage of Roma children actually having access at 3 or 4 years, rather than focusing on costly high stakes testing at school entry, which condemns many Roma children to segregated special schools. In short, a major monitoring effort needs to be made to measure accurately the number of Roma children in a locality; to calculate the actual number attending kindergarten; to increase their access and; to strengthen the integrated services provided by kindergartens so that these young children receive proper health care and education.

Reading and resources

– OSCE (2010), "Mapping of participation of Roma and Sinti children in early education processes within the OSCE region", available at www.osce.org/odihr/73874.

– UNICEF's resources on early childhood development for Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/early_childhood_1467.html.

– UNICEF (2013), "Early childhood development resource pack", available at www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/index_42890.html, accessed 27 July 2013.

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11. Many Roma families live in isolated rural areas of central and eastern European countries where qualified paediatricians and nurses are not available.

2. What early childhood curriculum and pedagogy for Roma children?

Key points addressed in this section:

–   What features should curriculum, pedagogy, the learning environment and assessment have so that young Roma children will feel welcomed and valued?

–   How can concerns about first and majority language development and culture be addressed in an inclusive ECCE programme?

–   Why is parental and community involvement important in ECCE, and what does effective parental and community involvement look like?

A first point to emphasise is that good practice for Roma children has its origin in good care and education practice for all young children. For this reason, this section addresses good curriculum practice for all children and then goes on to suggest how this practice can be adapted to better suit the presence of Roma children in mainstream classrooms.

Good curriculum practice for all kindergartens

The following are some principles that characterise good curriculum practice across European countries.

–   The early childhood curriculum is research-based and founded on an appropriate theory of how young children learn. In the early years, learning is meaning-making, that is, making sense of the world around one. It is about the construction of knowledge, "learning by doing" rather than transmission of knowledge. The natural learning strategies of the young child are play (in particular, make-believe play), active discovery, interactions with other children and freedom of movement.

–   The early childhood curriculum is holistic. As outlined in section 1, the early childhood curriculum is holistic in its aims, that is, it focuses on the well-being, health and all-round development of young children. It addresses children's socio-emotional and learning needs, leading eventually to school readiness.

–   The early childhood curriculum is child-centred and based primarily on the interests and agency of the child. For this reason, the early childhood educator will provide opportunities for young children to be active, to take initiatives, to socialise, to explore their own actual experiences and interests. Teachers will work on the authentic world of the child, that is, on themes such as: the children's recent experiences; personal identity; the family and its members; parents' work and interests; the local community and its concerns; nature and the changing seasons; and the professions that fascinate young children.

–   The early childhood curriculum gives attention to socio-emotional development. During this period of life, the child's essential socio-emotional tasks are to become autonomous and to forge a satisfactory personal identity. In this endeavour, the quality of the relationship between teachers and children is of core importance. Staff who show respect for children, listen to what they say, respond sympathetically and use language and reasoning, help children to achieve better cognitive and social-emotional outcomes. In their classrooms, children develop more autonomy, greater self-regulation and more positive social behaviour including co-operation, sharing and empathy (Sylva et al., 2008).

–   The early childhood curriculum emphasises social values (see, for example, Box 3), that is, it introduces the child to the wider world of society and its demands. Every society and community has its own particular rules with which citizens must learn to comply. The early childhood educators will teach and model for young children constructive behaviour: how to behave and how to resolve conflicts peacefully and skilfully, without resorting to unacceptable behaviour. They will do this with patience, knowing that it takes time for young children to acquire self-regulation and other important life-skills. Young children who are stressed or suffer from neglect may have initial difficulties in accepting limits.

Box 3 – An example from Sweden

An example of attention to social values is found in the Swedish Curriculum for Pre-school from which the following is an extract:

"Democracy forms the foundation of the pre-school. For this reason all pre-school activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values. An important task of the pre-school is to establish and help children acquire the values on which our society is based. The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between the genders as well as solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that the school shall actively promote in its work with children.

The pre-school should take into account and develop children's ability to take responsibility and manage their social life in society so that solidarity and tolerance are established at an early stage. The pre-school should encourage and strengthen the child's compassion and empathy for others. All activities should be characterised by care for the individual and aim at developing a sense of empathy and consideration for others, as well as openness and respect for the differences in the way people think and live."

Source: Swedish Curriculum for Pre-school, 2010.

–   The early childhood curriculum stresses inclusion as an essential value that multicultural societies need. In the early childhood centre, inclusion should be reflected in the attitudes of teachers and in the physical environment. The confidence of minority parents in early childhood staff can be weakened or reinforced by the physical environment of the early childhood centre. A child whose background, language and culture are not reflected positively in kindergarten photos, language signs or children's work may feel less comfortable and less able to participate. Diversity in the use of signs also helps to reassure parents that their children will be given due recognition and have equal status. In sum, the physical environment

should communicate that diversity is valued and respected. The box below (Box 4) suggests a diversity checklist that can be used in ECCE settings.

Box 4 – A diversity checklist

–   Check all the imagery on the walls, play materials, jigsaws, food, toys and books. Have they been selected with diversity in mind? Make certain that images of children with special needs are included and that Roma life is illustrated in a positive way.

–   Keep in mind language issues in labelling equipment, room names, groups, etc.

–   Provide attractive toys and equipment for children.

–   Examine what messages are being given or not given in the children's books and texts provided.

–   Ensure that the necessary environmental adaptations have been made for children with visual impairment or with a disability.

–   Information for families and children. Does it exist? Is it accessible? Is there someone available to help illiterate parents?

–   Books and materials for children: are materials accessible to all children? Are they placed at eye level and within reach of young children? Are they clearly labelled, both pictorially and in letters?

Source: Adapted from the Office of the Minister of Children, 2006.

–   The early childhood curriculum is educational, that is, the educators help children to transform their daily experiences into learning moments. An educational encounter occurs when children and educators working together on a theme or event or idea – especially in conversation, play or project work – create a new or more complex understanding or acquire a new or improved skill. For this to take place, the educator needs to enter authentically the child's world and transform their interests and ideas into shared meaning and understanding. She/he will lead children toward second level thinking through the discussions with them and will link their interests to the more academic aspects of the curriculum, including language, literacy, numbers and other knowledge and skills useful for the children when they enter school.

–   The early childhood curriculum stresses both the educator's role and the child's activity. The fostering of experiential, self-motivated learning in the child requires a pedagogy that puts children's participation at the centre of the curriculum. This calls for specific training of educators in the competencies that allow this to happen. For this reason, the various knowledge strands of the curriculum, which a particular society identifies as important, should not become the subject of prolonged direct teaching. Rather, they should emerge for discussion from the stories and concerns that children express in their play or project work. An experienced educator will expand the children's understanding of these themes through questions, shared thinking, appropriate explanations and other pedagogical approaches.

Among the essential competencies of the educator is to have strong relational skills, that is, the ability to form positive relationships with young children and their families. This is critical for very young children who need attachment to their educator in order to relate

and learn. For families too, the relationship with the educator is important, especially for families who generally suffer from exclusion. A warm relationship with their child's educator can stimulate their interest in education and provide opportunities for families and educators to learn from each other.

– The early childhood curriculum encourages educators to plan an interesting (for the child) classroom layout. In the Ten Action Points of Experiential Education, no fewer than four are devoted to stimulating the child's involvement in learning through giving greater attention to classroom layout and the activities within it (Laevers and Moons, 1997). This corresponds to Malaguzzi's insight when he refers to the environment as "the third educator" (after parents and educators). Among the initiatives that educators can take are:

  – rearrange the classroom in appealing corners or areas;[12]

  – check the content of the areas and make them more interesting and challenging;

  – introduce periodically new and unconventional materials and activities (one change at a time, observing how children react);

  – identify children's interests and offer activities that meet these (changing) interests;

  – replace corners or activities in which children are not interested.

– The early childhood curriculum encourages the use of outdoor spaces. The indoors is often considered the primary (and sometimes, only) learning space for young children and all resources are focused there. However, the outdoors has its own pedagogical importance. In the outdoors, children learn about the cycle of life through observing living things and can gain respect for nature and the local environment. If carefully guided, they will become skilled at classifying, experimenting and observation – and in drawing what they see. A natural or intelligently constructed outdoor environment places the focus on "experiencing" rather than "teaching". Young children learn much through discovery and self-initiated activities and their learning is multiplied through active involvement with each other. Natural elements provide for open-ended play and creative exploration with diverse materials.

> Guided by experienced staff, children learn colours, numbers and vocabulary experientially in natural settings. They can experience the basic principles of scientific enquiry in manipulating and collecting natural objects and in observing plant, animal and bird life (OECD, 2006).

Special emphases in curriculum and pedagogy when Roma children are present

The above curricular principles are included in curricula across Europe. It is necessary, however, to adapt some of these features to meet the needs of the children who compose the group. There is no question here of having a different or simpler curriculum for particular children. Such a solution is contrary to the legal requirement of equal opportunity for all children and also shows a misunderstanding of what an early childhood curriculum is about.

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12. In particular, reading and dramatic play corners are important for language development, but all corners (dolls, home, water, construction, nature, sand box, etc.) are useful for interaction between children and lend themselves well to questions by teachers to lead children to second-level thinking.

An early childhood curriculum is primarily a reflection on the experiences of children within the centre and secondarily, about the ideas and concerns children express, related to their personal lives, families and community. This reflection is flexibly adapted by educators to suit the different needs of different children, both children who tend to understand quickly and children who mature more slowly. High expectations concerning all children should, however, be the rule: every child can make progress in learning and one day contribute to society. For this reason, many kindergartens across Europe have an individual learning plan for each child. When Roma children are present, the following have been found to be helpful.

Maintaining a positive image of the Roma child

The views held by educators about the young children in their care deeply influence relationships and pedagogical practice within the early childhood centre. How then should Roma children be seen? Like all other young children, they need to be seen positively. It is important to hold the view that Roma children have great potential, and are capable of making a valuable contribution to society if they are accepted and educated in inclusive ECCE services and schools (see Box 5).

Box 5 – Roma children make excellent progress when given the opportunity

When Roma families are accepted and are properly supported, Roma parents do send their children to kindergarten and school. In addition, the children benefit and make progress. The findings of a World Bank report (2012) based on a 2011 UNDP/World Bank/European Commission survey of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and the Slovak Republic show that Roma children attending pre-school have much higher scores on measures of learning and much higher likelihood of subsequent enrolment into secondary school.

A recent study by Fremlova and Ureche (2011) followed the education progress of Roma children, whose families had emigrated to England from the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. In their former countries, many of these children had been assigned to special classes and schools for children with disabilities, whereas in England they were fully integrated into mainstream English schools. The research shows that after a few years, the average attainment of Roma pupils (ages 9-15 years) in literacy, numeracy and science was just below the average. In terms of the children's spoken English, 89% spoke fluent or almost fluent English. The younger the respondents were when they first came to the UK, the more quickly they were able to speak English fluently. According to one of the teachers:

"I do not see any difference between the Roma pupils and the non-Roma ones in terms of their ability or their potential; it is just a question of catching up. After a year or so they are at the same level as their peer group."

When the Roma parents were interviewed, they agreed that they valued the overall atmosphere at the English schools, their children's feeling of being welcome there, their experience of equal treatment and equal opportunity, and the absence of anti-Roma sentiments and racism. They all said the prospect of their children's education and employment was one of the most powerful driving forces behind their decision to move to the UK.

Showing respect for the background and cultural identity of the Roma child

Like all children, Roma children differ from each other by wealth, social class, family background and attitudes to education. Whatever their background, they should, first of all, be respected as individuals, with educators acknowledging the unique talents and desires of each child. At the same time, educators will value positively the history, language and culture of Roma children and their parents. All too often, kindergarten is seen as a place where Roma children are to be socialised in the norms and values of majority society, without reference to their own culture and social identity.

Organising the environment to reflect diversity and the presence of Roma children

In the section above on the physical environment of the kindergarten, the Guidelines stressed the importance of having an environment that reflected the diversity of the children present. Kindergarten teachers will make an effort to inform themselves about Roma customs and acknowledge the presence of Roma children through, for example, a display of positive images and the celebration of birthdays and feasts. Teachers will provide positive information to enable children to live well with each other and to eradicate prejudice and bias. The following questions need to be asked continually: Do all children feel at home here? How do the children relate to each other? Is there a divide between majority and minority children? How do staff relate to minority children?

Creating a warm, accepting and inclusive environment

The following are some important means of showing a positive attitude toward Roma families and an effective way of bringing their children into the kindergarten:

– By employing Roma teachers and assistants, it not only helps young children who are experiencing language difficulties but also reassures Roma parents that Roma and Roma culture are accepted by the school. Roma personnel can provide a strong link between the home culture and the culture of the education system, and cultivate parents' support for their children's schooling process.

– It helps to make the kindergarten attractive to Roma children through more appropriate pedagogical practice, as outlined in several places in these Guidelines, for example, through welcoming Roma parents and their perspectives on child-rearing; through creating a safe and attractive environment for Roma children; through warm, inclusive and non-judgmental attitudes on the part of educators; through understanding not only the difficulties of Roma children but also appreciating their strengths.

– Mono-cultural attitudes should be avoided in the kindergartens. The RECI national reports (2012) suggest that many kindergartens have not come to terms with societal diversity, cultural sensitivity and the basic rights of minorities. This is reflected in the lack of Roma staff members in kindergartens (the situation is evolving), few signs written in Romani languages and little recognition of Roma culture to any significant level. The situation suggests that initial educator preparation needs to place a greater focus on cultural competence (see below (Box 6)).

–   Innovative approaches to increase parent engagement, especially of Roma mothers, should be encouraged. Two innovative programmes were developed and implemented in Hungary as part of the "A Good Start" initiative, namely, "Your story" and "Home-pre-school liaison", which has significantly increased the involvement of Roma parents in the education of their children.

Box 6 – The Roma Education Fund project: "A Good Start"

The project "A Good Start" was launched in 2010 by the Roma Education Fund (REF). The project targets both disadvantaged Roma and non-Roma children, from birth to age 6 or 7 years, as well as their parents or caregivers. It is implemented in 16 locations in four countries (FYR Macedonia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia) where it offers pre-school, community and home-based services. Its objectives are to enhance the school readiness and subsequent life opportunities of the children involved, and to scale up access to quality early childhood care and education services for Roma children. The project activities were designed after analysis of baseline surveys, which were carried out by REF and its partners, in order to get an overall picture of the coverage and quality of ECCE services and schooling in each targeted locality. In summary, the main activities are the following:

–   supporting children to attend formal kindergarten;

–   training teachers and supporting staff;

–   providing informal classes for children;

–   providing parenting classes and enrolment support (e.g. identity documents, vaccination).

To date, the project has successfully broken down access barriers to education and health with the result that more children are accessing mainstream or informal pre-school education and health services. Parents are more knowledgeable about education and early care and there are better relations between the kindergartens and Roma parents. The outcomes include: improved access to quality early education for disadvantaged Roma children; improved parenting practices; improved access and use of early health and care services for young Roma children; and improved transition and access to quality mainstream primary school education. Already, 4 350 Roma and children from disadvantaged backgrounds are the direct beneficiaries of the programme.

Source: Roma Education Fund (2013a)

A warm, accepting and inclusive environment is perhaps the most important element to draw young Roma children and their families to the kindergarten. If children feel unwanted, they and their parents will not be motivated to make the effort to enrol early or persevere in education. The climate of the kindergarten is critical and the kindergarten team must make every effort to establish supportive, nurturing relationships with excluded children and their families.

Developing majority language and pre-literacy for dual language children

Kindergarten educators have the very important responsibility of introducing the official majority language to second-language learners. Realistic expectations of what young

children can learn in the space of one or two years (the normal length of attendance by Roma children at kindergarten) may help educators to approach the task without placing undue pressure or stress on the children. Research on second-language learning suggests that:

–   it takes around 10 years for most second-language learners to reach a degree of proficiency equal to native language speakers (Hughes et al., 2010). In other words, second-language children in all countries generally score less well on official language and communication until well into secondary school;

–   there is evidence too about intergenerational illiteracy, namely, that the children of illiterate parents are more likely to have limited literacy, particularly in the early years (Beller, 2008).

These findings should not be allowed to become a self-fulfilling prophecy and lead educators to have limited aspirations for Roma pupils. Kindergartens that employ clear diagnostic procedures, followed by early intervention, can enable virtually all children to achieve good oral language levels and to lay the foundations of literacy. The involvement of parents in literacy programmes, even those with limited literacy themselves, has also been shown to have a positive effect on their children's literacy (see section on working with Roma parents and communities as partners below). Furthermore, this involvement stimulates the parents to become themselves functionally literate, breaking cycles of deprivation and motivating them to support their children's learning (Cooter, 2006).

Pre-literacy strategies in the kindergarten

Early literacy and numeracy are among the skills useful for children as they move toward school. In the classroom, educators can employ strategies that help children to develop early literacy and numeracy in a non-formal way. Among these are:

–   encouraging purposeful and meaningful play in specific work areas (water area, construction, art, dramatic role-play with props, intentional outdoor play, etc.) and being present with words for objects or other concepts that young children may lack;

–   giving children many first-hand experiences and asking them questions to extend their understanding, vocabulary and communications skills, for example: Why did this happen? What would happen if …? What do you think about …? Have you seen this elsewhere? Such questions decontextualise, foster thinking and stimulate the child's verbal production;

–   reinforcing children's vocabulary through interacting with them individually and in small groups on a broad range of topics;

–   creating a print-rich environment with labels (accompanied with a picture) for children's names, attendance cards, the daily schedule, play corners, materials, etc.;

–   making the reading corner attractive with many relevant picture books, including picture books in the different languages spoken by children;

–   exposing children to the sounds of the language through reading aloud, story-telling, nursery rhymes, simple phonics (which sound begins these words?), but avoiding formal language teaching, such as grammar, vocabulary lists and the like; young children learn better in authentic language situations, that is, in situations where they experience new things and wish to communicate their thoughts and feelings;

– privileging the interests of children in organising project work and offering suggestions that comply with the curriculum, for example families, professions, descriptions of the school, the neighbourhood, how things work, etc; the educators accompany the children's work through questions, writing for them, showing them where to find information and supporting their organisation;

– involving families in children's learning and literacy; research shows that family support for education and children's learning is a critical element in children's success (Sylva et al. 2008; Vandenbroeck et al., 2008).

The question of teaching Romani languages in kindergarten is not always clear. Many Roma parents would prefer their children to become operational in the majority language and, in addition, there may be practical difficulties in organising Romani language classes. Research is clear, however, that language development in the mother tongue is important for the cognitive development of young children and for later mastery of another language (Beller, 2008). Certainly, young children in the kindergarten can be helped to learn the majority language by the presence of a Roma teaching assistant or other bridging personnel. Educators can help too by providing as much support as possible to young Roma children who are making strong efforts to communicate in (for them) a foreign language (see, for example, Box 7).

Box 7 – A Romanian initiative to enhance bilingual education

In Romania, since 2005, a bilingual experiment has been run by a Romani NGO, Amare Romentza, in partnership with the school inspectorate. Roma children and their educators use a bilingual (Roma and Romanian) curriculum. Nine groups from different counties now use the curriculum. According to Ministry of Education figures, the number of children attending Romani language classes at kindergarten has risen steadily in recent years.[13] Within an early childhood project, co-funded by the World Bank and the Romanian Government, a strong emphasis is placed on educator training responsive to the needs of Roma children. The approach is opening the door to a more intercultural approach sensitive to Romani culture and language. These bilingual kindergartens call attention to Romani history, traditions, language and literature and are generally accompanied by books and resource materials in Romanes to be used by children and educators.

Source: Open Society Foundations, Roma Education Fund, UNICEF, 2012.

Inclusive assessments that focus on the strengths of each child

Children's assessments[14] are greatly influenced by the goals set for young children, the education concept in use and the requirements of the curriculum. If a country uses a broad holistic curriculum, then assessments will most likely be broad, use multiple instruments

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13. Sarău, 2010.
14. There is an overlap in the use of the words "test" and "assessment". The former refers to a standardised test, formally administered, and often used to grade children or even to place them in one setting or another. Assessments tend on the contrary to use multiple instruments (observations, performance measures, interviews, portfolios and examples of children's work) and take place over a longer period of time.

and take place regularly over a longer period of time. If a narrow curriculum is used in kindergarten, with a strong emphasis on teaching pre-defined content, then assessment is likely to be narrow and ignore the health, motor and socio-emotional development of the child. The focus on academic content can also distract educators from the intense relational and pedagogical work that young children need. It can also lead young children to think negatively about their abilities at a moment when identity formation is intense.

Several countries with excellent early childhood centres, such as the Nordic countries, are extremely reluctant to use child measures or even to announce detailed learning standards for young children. When central learning standards are evoked, they are for children to strive for and not to become a means of comparing or ranking children. The focus of Nordic attention is on the performance of kindergarten centres in areas such as: health, safety and nutrition; group sizes and adult-child ratios; staff training, competence and experience; curriculum implementation and, in particular; the quality of staff-child interactions.

When dealing with children from disadvantaged backgrounds, assessments should be inclusive and governed by the following principles:

– There should be a focus on holistic development and general skills; assessment should be broader than school knowledge and skills. There are many domains of development, such as the child's exploration of who she/he is and where she/he belongs. For example, a child's ability to communicate with other children is just as important a skill as early mastery of certain letters, which will come, at any rate, when the child is ready. Some countries, for example, New Zealand, examine broad generic skills, such as being involved, self-regulation, persisting at a task, taking responsibility and expressing an opinion.

– Where there is use of multiple types of assessment within the early childhood centre, the learning of each child is followed and documented, for example, through systematic daily observation, child portfolios, work samples, documentation (as theorised and practised, in for example, the Reggio Emilia schools), child and parent interviews, and the use of learning stories as outlined by Carr and Lee (2012). Educators, specialists, families, parents and children themselves can be invited to validate the learning of the child. In sum, multiple perspectives are brought to bear on the child's learning, which is examined in far greater detail than a simple test can uncover.

– If there is a strong focus on what children are able to do, then true assessment of children's work can be achieved in intercultural settings if assessment is seen, as defined by Rinaldi (2005), as the process of "making learning visible". Educators document regularly what the child is able to do rather than focusing on deficits or whether the child has achieved some education goal or developmental norm.

– Educators should realise that variations in the performance of young children are much wider in the early childhood period than later in school. Because of the uneven rate of development during the early years, wide variations appear both between children and even within the same child's performance at different moments.

– There should be respect for valued dimensions of education voiced by Roma parents. Congruence between the aims of the early childhood centre and parental values and aspirations for their children is important (Vandenbroeck et al., 2008). This respect for parental values should be reflected also in assessment. Does

assessment include discussion with minority parents concerning what they want for their children and their feed-back on how the centre is performing vis-à-vis their wishes? Are elements from the child's home and culture included in the assessment portfolios? Do educators show parents respect by asking their advice and opinions? The issue is important not only at the kindergarten level but more widely as an issue of democracy. Because of low education levels and their long history of exclusion, Roma families and communities are often absent from school councils and other opportunities for civic participation. The kindergarten offers a less threatening opportunity for them to participate and one that could have a significant impact on how their children view education.

Working with Roma parents and communities as partners

As stated in section 1, parents play a central nurturing and educational role in their children's lives, particularly in the early childhood period. It is therefore important that early childhood services welcome, approach and relate well with parents of Roma and other backgrounds in order to build and maintain good relationships.

> Parents should be first introduced to the institution, and shown its purpose, and what it really offers. Many parents still have little faith in education… But, as time passes, they will accept co-operation and participate in the work programme in different ways, but only if somebody offers it to them (Roma teaching assistant, Nis, REC, Serbia Report (2012)).

However, as a general rule, Roma parents attend parent meetings in kindergartens quite rarely. Pre-school teachers often consider their absence as disinterest on the part of Roma parents for their children's education. To some extent this may be true as the link between education and employment can be tenuous for many Roma families, but the negative judgment of teachers may also suggest a lack of understanding for the real difficulties of very poor parents to send their children regularly to school.[15]

The continuity of children's experiences across the early childhood centre and home environment can be greatly enhanced through parent outreach that involves regular exchange of information and the adoption of consistent approaches to socialisation, daily routines, child development and learning. Parent outreach can also help encourage parents to follow their children's progress in the early childhood centre and school, provide children with interesting learning experiences at home and, in particular, engage in daily conversation and out-loud reading of children's books and stories. Working with parents can also facilitate relationship building among parents with minority and majority backgrounds.

In recent years, good progress has been made in European countries in strengthening parental involvement at kindergarten level. A simple model used in many countries is for each educator to work intensively with the parents of the children in his or her class, for example through classroom councils and through more informal means, such as forming parent groups to take charge of the centre's physical environment or to advise

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15. Points of contention between educators and Roma parents, for example attitudes to regular attendance, need to be addressed with understanding for the exceptional circumstances of families living in extreme poverty, yet negotiated in terms of the best interests of the child and the obligation placed on teachers to follow a programme.

the educators how their children are responding. Special care needs to be taken so that low-income and disadvantaged parents do participate in formal meetings such as parent councils and consultations. Some countries have found it helpful to legislate that early childhood centres should prepare a detailed annual plan for the involvement of parents in the centres, in particular to help them support their children's learning. Parents are encouraged to provide enriched care giving, more language exchanges with young children, the use of learning games at home and conversational reading.[16]

Practical strategies such as parent clubs and meetings, social and cultural events, a parents' room, adult education classes and community development actions have been found useful in opening communication between parents and educators. A good example is the parent education programme in Mésed, Hungary, managed by the Roma Education Fund, which has had the following positive results for both participating Roma mothers and their children (Box 8).

Box 8 – The Mésed Project, Hungary

Originally launched as part of the Roma Education Fund's "A Good Start" initiative, the Mésed Project has been carried out successfully and continues to be implemented even after the termination of the initiative. In the project, Roma mothers meet together weekly with a trained facilitator (eight out of nine facilitators are Roma women) for two-hour sessions in groups of between eight and 15. During the first hour of each session, group members receive a new children's story book. High-quality books, particularly those that convey messages to children about their feelings, behaviours and other life lessons have been sourced. They are given free to mothers ("We have no chance to buy books like this"). The mothers take turns to read the story aloud, while the facilitator guides the reading and initiates discussion about elements of the story and pictures. This constructivist learning technique encourages the mothers to explore the text and facilitates improved comprehension.[17] This is necessary as many of the women have low levels of education: "I have two years of primary school, I'm learning now from my grandchildren through reading books with them. I had to take care of younger children so I left school when I was nine years old."

By engaging the women with the story in this way, the facilitator is able to engage them with the text and model a teaching technique to be replicated with their children.

Source: Roma Education Fund, 2013b.

Moran et al. (2004) writing for the Department of Education and Skills in the UK, have identified some of the requirements of effective parenting support.

– Awareness is needed that families under multiple stresses will not be able to benefit fully from parenting support interventions unless their basic needs (food, shelter, employment) are met as well.

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16. See: www.teachingstrategies.com/page/FC_Abecedarian-Studies.cfm, accessed 26 July 2013.
17. "Constructivist" learning theories hold that learning is an active process that every individual embarks upon to organise and construct meaning from the world. To do this, children must be immersed in opportunities to make their own personal discoveries of language and to develop reasoning. See Green and Gredler (2002).

– Effective multi-agency working is required to enable parents to access the range of services usually needed. It is unrealistic to expect a single service to meet all needs – hence "joined up" services are necessary. Programmes should have more than one method of delivery.

– Although parents may draw a wide range of benefits from a parenting intervention, the blanket application of a particular type of programme can be counterproductive. Services should provide multiple routes in for families, that is, should have a variety of entry or referral routes.

– It is more effective to use well-tested parent programmes with a strong underlying theory that can describe the mechanisms of change to be expected. It is useful also if the programme can provide some evidence on how they will improve outcomes for children and parents.

Reading and resources

Ball J. (2011), *Enhancing learning of children from diverse language backgrounds: mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education in the early years*, UNESCO, Paris.

ISSA (2010), "Competent educators for the 21st century: principles of quality pedagogy", Budapest, available at http://www.issa.nl/docs_pdfs/Quality-principles-final-WEB.pdf. This is an excellent outline of principles and values for educators, published in 2010 by the International Step-by-Step Association (ISSA), which works extensively in central and eastern Europe. Its various chapters cover interactions between educators and children; family and community; inclusion, diversity and values of democracy; assessment and planning; teaching strategies; the learning environment; and professional development.

ISSA (2011), "Putting knowledge into practice: a guidebook for educators using ISSA's principles of quality pedagogy", available at www.issa.nl/qrp_1.html.

Office of the Minister for Children (2006), "Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers", Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Ireland, available at www.dcya.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=/documents/childcare/diversity_and_equality. pdf&mn. A short brochure that covers in a very practical way how early childhood practitioners can encourage children to live together and benefit from diversity.

Pramling N. and Pramling Samuelsson I. (eds) (2011), *Educational encounters: Nordic studies in early childhood didactics*, Springer, Dordrecht, The Netherlands.

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3. What training and support for early childhood educators to work effectively with Roma children?

Key points addressed in this section:

– What are some key requirements for the training and professional development of, and support for, early childhood educators working with diverse groups, including Roma children?

– What are some key competencies that early childhood educators should have when working in diversity contexts that include Roma children?

– What is the role of Roma assistants and mediators in ECCE services and schools?

– What can school and local authority leadership do to support early childhood educators?

Early childhood research shows how important well-trained educators are to achieving high quality in early childhood centres (OECD, 2006 and 2011; UNESCO, 2006; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008; Dalli and Urban, 2008; NESSE/Penn, 2009; Naudeau et al., 2011; European Commission CoRe, 2011b).

Many educators work in very poor conditions, especially in rural kindergartens serving Roma children. To do good work with young children, educators need proper buildings and adequate learning environments. In many countries, this is the responsibility of local government. Frequently, educators themselves brighten the classrooms and voluntarily supply age-appropriate pedagogical toys and teaching aids. But educators cannot mend leaking roofs, unsanitary buildings and lack of essential furniture. Such features also send out a powerfully negative message to educators that their work to educate disadvantaged children and redress social exclusion is not recognised. A similar message is sent out to Roma parents, namely, that their children are not valued sufficiently by the public authorities.

Pre-service education

Initial or pre-service education is a critical moment for young trainee teachers not only to learn theory and methodology but also to work on democratic values in education and on personal knowledge about Roma groups. An excellent outline of principles and values for educators was published in 2010 by the International Step-by-Step Association (ISSA), an organisation that has worked in central and eastern Europe (CEE) for decades and often with Roma children. Among other more pedagogical matters, ISSA addresses issues of inclusion, diversity and democratic values. The text entitled *Competent educators for the 21st century: principles of quality pedagogy* can be accessed

freely in several languages (ISSA, 2010). Its various focus areas cover interactions between educators and children; family and community; inclusion, diversity and values of democracy; assessment and planning; teaching strategies; the learning environment; and professional development. This guide covers not only issues of values but also practical aspects of early childhood pedagogy, such as the organisation of the classroom or how to practise outreach to parents. It is also backed up by a guidebook on how to put knowledge into practice, two professional development tools for pre-school and primary school and an illustrative video library, all available in ISSA's "A resource pack on quality pedagogy".[18]

Another strategy that has proven to be effective in pre-service training is to encourage the young undergraduates to take on significant periods of diversity field training. According to reports from several countries, trainee teachers volunteering to work in Roma settlements often return highly motivated to continue in this work and, in future years, may become master pedagogues in this field (RECI Overview Report, 2012).

Professional development

Opportunities for professional development are generally available in the central and eastern European countries. Educators are sometimes concerned, however, that the offer is not relevant enough to their needs. In addition, training is often located outside the kindergarten, whereas research suggests that professional development is more effective when it takes place on site and is focused on concerns chosen collegially by the kindergarten team. For a team of teachers, it is more motivating and effective to reflect together on possible solutions to local challenges that need to be addressed at a particular moment. Successful examples of such reflection are seen in Northern Ireland (to address ethnic divisions), in Poland (to address lack of kindergartens in rural areas), and in several eastern European countries (to improve outreach to Roma communities).

Participatory research projects engaging parents, educators and researchers have also proved to be very effective in Belgian and French cities aiming to improve the access of immigrant children to urban kindergartens. Such projects and the personal research that they entail are important for mature educators, as societies have changed considerably since their initial training days. Teachers who were trained some years ago need regular opportunities for professional development to respond to new challenges and new opportunities that society or a particular locality may present today (see Box 9, for example).

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18. To consult the resource pack, see http://www.issa.nl/qrp.html. More recently (2013), ISSA has completed a survey on the needs and aspirations of Roma early childhood personnel and, in partnership with the Open Society Foundation, has launched the Romani Early Years Network (REYN). Hosted and managed by ISSA, the network focuses on Roma and other professionals working in the field of early childhood development (ECD) with Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian, Sinti, Gitano and other communities. REYN's main purpose is to support the development of skills and good practice, extend the knowledge drawn from experiences of working effectively with Roma families and children in ECD, establish effective partnerships between Roma and other ECD professionals and paraprofessionals, and support professional development for those working with these marginalised and excluded groups.

Box 9 – Teacher in-service training for Roma inclusion: an example from Cyprus

This project was launched in 2007 and is supported by the European Commission. Its aim was to facilitate school and Roma family partnerships in order to establish an environment of collaboration and shared goals for children's education, by bridging the gap between Roma tradition and school tradition. This was achieved through teacher training in order to make them aware of the Roma culture, to develop their social and intercultural competencies and skills, to forge a better partnership with Roma parents and to motivate parents to value their children's participation in institutionalised education and become more involved. The training was constructed around nine modules: culture-enculturation; stereotypes and prejudice; Roma history; Roma culture; the culture of schools; the arts and cultural diversity; intercultural education; classroom management and methodology; curriculum design and development, and teacher-parent communication.

Different activities have been implemented: (1) an assessment of needs of teachers and Roma families to get insights into the experiences of teachers in the target schools; (2) the development of a teacher training curriculum aiming at enhancing teacher effectiveness in collaboration with Roma parents and developing action plans at class and school levels; (3) the provision of teacher training; (4) the implementation of teachers' interventions in activities of collaboration with schools; (5) the evaluation of the intervention programmes and training modules and the observation of the impact on Roma inclusion and on the improvement of Roma children's educational attendance in mainstream school.

The International Association for Intercultural Education (IAIE) was responsible for the evaluation of this training and the implementation of the interventions at schools. To maximise the outcomes of this project, the association developed: a web page, leaflets for a public awareness campaign, a report on Roma education and needs, teacher curriculum modules, a final handbook to disseminate the main material produced, presentations at international conferences and articles in scientific journals.

Source: INSETRom (2008).

Developing cultural competence among educators and other staff

Cultural competence is the ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures, in this particular case, the ability of mainstream educators to understand, communicate and interact sensitively with parents and children of Roma origin. In the context of the early childhood centre, cultural competence requires: (a) awareness of one's own cultural worldview, (b) awareness of one's attitudes towards cultural differences, (c) knowledge of the cultural practices and worldviews of Roma families, and (d) cross-cultural pedagogical skills. These skills can be developed through following anti-bias training, such as advocated in Derman-Sparks' *Anti-bias curriculum: tools for empowering young children* (1997) or the ISSA course described in Box 10, below.

Box 10 – Embracing diversity in kindergarten classrooms: an online course for practitioners working with Roma children – an example from ISSA

Based on its experience in conducting face-to-face training, ISSA has recently developed an online course in English and Serbian for practitioners working with Roma children, aged 3 to 6 years. The course guides practitioners (Roma and non-Roma) toward a self-reflective process of attitude transformation, leading in turn to more bias-free and anti-discriminatory practice, as well as to culturally sensitive, child-centred education.

This course is organised in six modules that address different topics. The first three modules focus on understanding the processes of discrimination and oppression. The fourth module addresses the issue of how we learn different languages and explores communication as a way to strengthen mutual understanding. The fifth module addresses how to work with communities and families in ways that empower them. The sixth module specifically talks about strategies practitioners can use in their kindergarten classroom to be more inclusive and to promote diversity.

With funding from the Open Society Foundations and UNESCO, ISSA and the CIP/Center for Interactive Pedagogy/Serbia have worked together to develop this course, building on the experience of the Education for Social Justice Program, carried out in the ISSA network.

Source: ISSA, 2013.

Incomprehension and failure can occur if educators are not culturally competent, that is, when they do not connect sufficiently with the values, beliefs and aspirations of the families who come to them (see below). Families and children rapidly sense if the attitudes of teachers or programme contents do not meet their cultural expectations or if educators do not show sufficient respect for them as persons. The situation calls for better knowledge of minority groups and the use of pedagogical approaches that are effective with children from insecure or deprived backgrounds.

Improving educators' knowledge of Roma children

A well-tried education principle is that, to teach a child, it helps to know the child's background and particular circumstances. Interaction with the children's community and families can help educators to teach children more effectively, with more understanding of their strengths and difficulties. The following knowledge and skills would seem a minimum when Roma children are part of a kindergarten group (Open Society Foundations, Roma Education Fund, UNICEF, 2012):

– Knowledge is necessary of the origin and history of the Roma people and the ability to differentiate between different Roma groups and backgrounds. This would include awareness of past and present injustices against the Roma and of their difficult living conditions.

– An appreciation is needed not only of the difficulties for Roma children to complete an education but also of the strengths of the Roma child. This is a principle of all good teaching: to appreciate the children that one is teaching and to be convinced that every child can learn and is capable of making a contribution to society.

–   An appreciation is needed of aspects of Roma culture, including knowledge of relevant Roma traditions and child-rearing practices. For kindergarten teachers, some knowledge of Roma culture, for example, children's stories, games, music, language and other cultural achievements is useful, especially when such knowledge can be used in pedagogical activities. Inclusion of such elements of Roma culture promotes diversity and intercultural understanding. Building elements of the remarkably rich Roma oral tradition into pre-school activities can be beneficial for all children.

Valuing the work of Roma assistants and mediators

The official recognition of Roma assistants has been one of the success stories of Roma education in recent years, paralleled in the health sector by the employment of Roma health mediators. In most instances, these assistants have been effective bridges between Roma families and the school, and have been instrumental in increasing the enrolment of Roma children and their retention in the education system.

At the same time, ministries need to ensure that all early childhood centres are inclusive through improving pre- and in-service training for educators. In parallel, Roma assistants and bridging personnel should have the opportunity to receive additional training that allows them to become fully certified educators through, for example, a credit system.[19] In this regard, Tankersley (2002) remarks:

> If the purpose of the teaching assistant is to help students succeed academically, then they must be seen as equal partners in the classroom. If they are pushed into a subservient role, then they may serve to reinforce in the minds of children their own low standing as a marginalized group. A re-definition of the assistant's role as co-educator and agent of change in their community can lead to an increase in Romani students' self-esteem and academic performance, as well as parent and community participation in school activities ("Wide Open School Foundation", 2011).

In sum, a fast-track approach to increase the number of Roma assistants and to promote, through further training, promising candidates to teacher status would be a welcome policy initiative. Several European countries, for example, Denmark, Italy and Slovenia (see Box 11), have developed pathways to enable teaching assistants to combine their work with tertiary level course work. In the CEE countries, a similar policy could not only provide employment in the Roma community but also present Roma children with valuable role models and improve the efficiency of the education system. There is also a question of equity and representation: the staffing of community services should reflect, in so far as is possible, the composition of the population being served.

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19. Several critics have noted that the model of Roma assistant/majority teacher reproduces the social inequality that prevails between Roma and the mainstream population. Because qualified ethnic minority staff are hard to find, young Roma women with lower qualifications are hired, serving as bi-cultural or bilingual assistants with lower salaries and less stable working conditions compared to qualified teachers. In addition, the practice tends to legitimise the attitudes of mainstream teachers who find it difficult to work with specific populations. An assumption is made that one needs to share a similar background in order to understand and communicate well with minority groups. This may lead mainstream teachers to conclude that they need not consider any more their communication gap with poor minority groups as a challenge to be overcome (Vandenbroeck, 2011).

Box 11 – The contribution of Roma assistants: an example from Slovenia

In order to include Roma children more effectively into early education, the Ministry of Education and Sport of Slovenia sponsored a project run by the Roma Union of Slovenia (RUS). Thirty-nine elementary schools and 20 pre-school institutions were involved, in each of which project teams of teachers and Roma assistants were established. The aims of the project were:

– to enhance the efficiency of the ongoing inclusion process;

– to educate and train Roma teaching assistants and educational staff;

– to encourage the participation of Roma parents;

– to maintain and respect Romani language and culture; and

– to develop a curriculum that would ensure the principle and moral value of equity.

This project has emphasised the importance of the Roma teaching assistants who set an example and were able to communicate to Roma parents the importance of education. They also helped the Roma children learn the Slovene language and to become aware of their ability to achieve education objectives and skills. These assistants are now considered as a crucial bridge between the Roma community and the educational institutions. They have helped to produce manuals on Romani culture, language, history and identity which have proven useful for teachers to familiarise themselves with this essential knowledge.

Overall, the project has been very successful and has produced good results. The number of Roma children attending pre-school and primary education institutions has increased and there is one Roma teaching assistant in every partner school. The project also improved co-operation between Roma parents and institutions and between Roma teaching assistants and teachers.

Source: Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, 2011.

School leadership and staff teamwork

Research from many countries agrees that a strongly motivated kindergarten leader can transform quality and diversity practice. A primary goal for kindergarten principals is to create among educators and parents a common culture of acceptance and achievement for all children. There is also agreement that principals should be selected carefully and receive specific training for the role. In addition to identifying new goals and projects for the centre, a good principal will also seek relevant professional development opportunities for her/his staff. Collegial teamwork and responsibility are also important factors in raising quality levels, for example, through weekly meetings and shared documentation. School leadership is an essential part of operational quality.

Among the goals that the principal and his or her team might set themselves with regard to diversity, the following have been identified by organisations such as DECET (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training) and ISSA:

– promoting an inclusive ethos in each centre, grounded in a commitment to social justice and respect of diversity;

- ensuring that children's needs, interests and experiences remain the focal point of educational initiatives;

- adopting a child-centred pedagogy that reflects societal diversity and promotes holistic development;

- supporting the development of children's individual and group identities by nurturing their feeling of belonging in a positive climate that welcomes diversity;

- sustaining the competencies of educators through continuous professional development that supports them in responding to the changing needs of children, families, communities and society;

- creating democratic decision-making structures within the centre that encourage educators and parents to express divergent views;

- co-constructing educational practices in dialogue with children and parents through collegial reflection and documentation; involving parents as equal partners in pedagogical decision-making;

- encouraging the active involvement of staff in issues that concern the local community.

Local authority leadership and investment

In many parts of central and eastern Europe, local authorities have well-defined responsibilities with regard to young children – responsibility for providing and mapping services, for buildings and for supervision. They face, however, many difficulties, for example, insufficient transfer of funds and services from central government, extremely small municipalities without the tax-base to raise sufficient funding and, above all, lack of expertise and motivation to provide services for all children, in particular, for the children of excluded groups. However, with leadership, current exclusionary practices could be limited or eradicated through, for example, establishing a municipal Children's Council, with minority representation (RECI Report, 2012). A municipal council for children could be given the responsibility to:

- define an annual municipal policy for children and encourage minority parents to be more involved in supporting children's services;

- negotiate with ministry and regional authorities working for children and ensure better co-ordination of local health, welfare and education services for young children;

- ensure equality of access to children's services through transparent enrolment procedures and careful data gathering, while providing special attention to families belonging to less visible groups that might not be present in early childhood centres;

- supervise the mapping and organisation of settings, and the quality of kindergarten buildings, outdoor spaces and education materials;

- ensure that staff composition reflects the diversity of the community.

Reading and resources

Council of Europe (2005), "Teaching kit for Roma children at pre-school level", available at www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/Roma/preschool_en.asp. The teaching kit helps children develop the basic skills needed to start primary school and learn how to study, educates parents about the necessity of knowledge, improves children's analytical and reasoning skills, and encourages their imagination. It is also available as a CD-Rom with fact sheets for the individual activities and a methodological handbook for the tutor and/or mediator.

European Commission (2011d), "Effective educational practice at a pre-primary educational level: Project 2: European effective educational practices: how is education contributing to overcome or reproduce social exclusion?" Available in "Collection of Monographs" at www.ub.edu/includ-ed/results.htm.

ISSA (2012), "Building opportunities in early childhood from the start: a teacher's guide to practices in inclusive early childhood services", Budapest, available at http://www.issa.nl/AGS%20Good%20Practice%20Guide.pdf.

ISSA (2010), Competent educators for the 21st century: principles of quality pedagogy, available at http://www.issa.nl/docs_pdfs/Pedagogical-Standards-final-WEB.pdf.

"Diversity in early childhood education and training", available at www.decet.org.

Office of the Minister for Children (2006), "Diversity and equality guidelines for childcare providers", Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Ireland, available at www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/childcare/diversity_and_equality.pdf.

4. What transition from home or early childhood services to primary school for Roma children?

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Key points addressed in this section:

– What view of transition to primary education favours inclusion and continued participation of Roma children in primary school?

– What approaches exist to promote school readiness of Roma children when they do not attend formal early childhood education services?

– What can early childhood educators, school teachers and policy makers do to provide smooth transition from home or early childhood education services to primary school?

– What kind of assessment at primary school entry encourages Roma children to stay and continue participation in school?

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Transitioning to and entering primary school is generally a stimulating experience for young children. But it can also present a challenge, not least for Roma children who generally have little experience of participating in organised ECCE services prior to primary school. In fact, a sizeable proportion of Roma children are unlikely to have experienced group routines or even to have had sustained social contact with other children outside their family and community. Because of the poverty and isolation of their homes, they may never have held a book or pencil, or know how schools and education work. Without pre-school, the probability of these children dropping out of school and not completing primary education is very high.

Understanding school entry as a basic right of the child

Transition from home to primary school, or from an early childhood education service to primary school, is therefore a critical moment for many Roma children. It should be viewed as a shared process involving the close co-operation of stakeholders, rather than measuring if children have acquired a set of normative developmental or academic characteristics (Petriwskyj and Grieshaber, 2011; Meisels, 2007). In this understanding, transition and school entry are not viewed as a child presenting a candidacy for entry but as each child's basic right. This basic understanding should lead to reflection by the education authorities about how to adapt school entry procedures and the first years in primary school so as to ensure greater enrolment and retention of Roma children. What are the partnerships needed at local level to assuage the fears of Roma parents, to persuade them of the value of mainstream education, to feel sure that their children will be supported to make progress, or – which is often a critical issue – to help them find the

means to send their children to school with regularity? In many instances, effective partnerships with families, communities and Roma organisations are not sufficiently in place.

Transition via preparatory programmes

To prevent school drop-out from occurring in the first year of school, several countries with significant numbers of Roma children have opted to introduce legislation and programmes to help Roma and other disadvantaged children to benefit from an organised early education experience for at least some months prior to primary school entry. For example, Serbia has established a mandatory Preparatory Pre-school Programme for nine months for all children who are not in the mainstream kindergarten.[20]

As mentioned briefly in section 1, preparatory programmes are necessary in some instances and have had some success leading, for example, to increased enrolment of Roma children, reaching over 50% in some countries. Yet concerns remain that preparatory schemes are designed more from the perspective of the needs of education systems for a smooth transition of children into primary school, rather than from the perspective of the child's holistic development and well-being. Pedagogical approaches and classroom environments practised in preparatory classes are often not child-centred, and arrangements to regulate, inspect and fund them may not be appropriate. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that these programmes often focus on the three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic), and do not address holistically children's physical, social-emotional and cognitive development, which are all important aspects of the child's developmental readiness for school (UNICEF, 2009). For this reason, questions can be raised with regard to preparatory schemes including:

– Do all eligible children, including Roma children, attend such programmes? What are the reasons for attendance as well as non-attendance?

– Are preparatory or school readiness programmes of sufficient length?

– Do such programmes introduce children to a variety of social and learning activities through play-based and experiential pedagogies?

– Do such programmes offer health and nutritional support for children such as providing free meals and health check-ups? Do they address children's needs holistically?

– Do such programmes ensure genuine communication with parents and involve them as partners?

– Have the existing measures and programmes for transition to primary school been evaluated and found effective?

– What can be done so that all eligible children attend preparatory or school readiness programmes?

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20. Hungary has gone further and made kindergarten compulsory from the age of three years. The Nordic countries provide free priority places for disadvantaged children, including Roma children, in early childhood education services. Other countries provide financial aid and other incentives, such as free meals.

Transition as a shared responsibility of ECCE services and primary schools

As the number of Roma children seeking entry to primary school is increasing, it is important to examine what early childhood education services can do to ease the transition of these children into primary school. The following are suggestions found in good practice in many countries:

–   Encourage the primary school to ready itself for young children, for example, to have furniture and materials familiar to pre-school children and use an adopted pedagogy and curriculum, at least in the first year of primary school.

–   Provide suggestions and guidance to parents on how they can play a positive role in smoothing their child's transition experience and in supporting their first attempts at formal reading and writing.

–   At primary school level, give special attention to children who have had no experience of early education. Adjust pedagogical tools to the individual needs of each child and be patient in order to allow sufficient time for children to adapt.

Preschool or kindergarten

–   If the child is already in preschool or kindergarten, prepare children and their parents in advance for change.

–   Give attention to the child's understanding of continuity. Continuity for a child often means continuity of relationships, for example, to have the possibility to move upward with his or her friends or to have a bridging period with an early childhood teacher in familiar surroundings (National Center for Early Development and Learning, 2002; Docket and Perry, 2001).

–   Explain the common features and differences between early childhood and primary school to children and their families.

–   Organise visits to the primary school for children to meet the new teacher and become familiar with the surroundings as well as common programmes for kindergarten children and parents (e.g. in the framework of open days in schools).

–   Clarify the expectations of parents, early childhood and primary school teachers about transition as well as about the first years of primary school. Parents need to know that they should give attention to what is a potentially challenging moment for their child.

For early childhood and primary school teachers

A set of practical suggestions for teachers to facilitate transition are provided in the ISSA-REF guide: "Building opportunities in early childhood from the start: teacher's guide to practices in inclusive early childhood services" (Trikic and Ionescu, ISSA-REF, 2012), from which the following box (Box 12) is extracted:

Box 12 – What can you do to make the transition easier?

– Talk with parents and children about school, and what happens there. What will be different, and what will be the same?

– Make a list with children about what they expect from school, their worries and their questions.

– Invite someone from the school, like one of their future teachers or a school psychologist, to look at the children's lists, and discuss them with the children.

– Share your practice and your teaching values with your colleagues. Tell your colleagues how you incorporate families' values in your work to make transitions easier for children.

– Prepare children's portfolios and give them to their future teachers, or let children take their portfolios with them to their new school.

– Pay extra close attention to children who may drop out during a transition time. Talk with their parents and ask them what kind of support would be good for their children.

– Collect data about existing supports like free school books, for example, for the poorest families in your group.

– Try to accompany children who have to take a test to enrol in a new school, if you think they will face problems with the test. If the child has difficulties speaking in the testing language, make certain that a translator will be available.

Source: Trikic and Ionescu, ISSA-REF, 2012:82.

Petriwskyj and Grieshaber (2011) offer other suggestions to policymakers and teachers for realising more positive transitions, particularly in diversity contexts.

For policymakers

– Formulate policies on transition to school so that they focus on pedagogical processes supporting a range of children (instead of singular constructs such as age of school entry, readiness or risk);

– Provide opportunities for regular, ongoing professional development of staff concerning this important moment in the lives of children and parents;

– Incorporate policy on family and community involvement, to reinforce the importance of broader stakeholder participation in transition.

Appropriate assessments at primary school entry

In several CEE countries, the Roma child's insufficient knowledge of the official language coupled with unsuitable assessment procedures has resulted in channelling disproportionate numbers of Roma pupils into special classes or special schools for children with developmental delays.

> To justify the practice, children are tested at the age of 5, 6 or 7 for entry into primary school. True to the defectology tradition still influential in the central and eastern European countries, these tests look for weaknesses and not strengths. In addition, they are generally culturally biased in the sense that they are designed with the majority child in mind and are

administered through the majority language (few psychologists speak Romani languages). According to the National Reports, the time spent with each child may be as short as 15 minutes.[21] Following these tests, a disproportionate number of Roma children are allocated to special classes or placed in special schools where simplified curricula are used. "Graduation" from these schools has little value in the eyes of potential employers or of society at large (RECI Overview Report, pp. 31-32).

An inspiring reform of the practice is taking place in Serbia where the new Law on the Fundamentals of Education (2009) recognises that children with disabilities or learning challenges should have opportunities for education equal to those of other children.[22] What is perhaps most impressive about this law is that inclusion is viewed as intrinsic to the mission, values and practices of public education. A new Law on Pre-school Education goes in the same direction and innovates in the matter of assessing children with disabilities and learning difficulties. No longer should these children be placed in categories or assessed in terms of special placements, but solely in terms of the support they will need in mainstream schools. This is a significant step forward and one that merits being studied and replicated in other European countries.

Strong investment in the first years of primary school

If Roma children actually enter primary school, teachers need to support them and monitor carefully their progress to prevent demoralisation and drop-out. In fact, primary education systems as a whole need to invest far more strongly in those first years, for example, using experienced literacy teachers, low child-staff ratios, Roma assistants to support children with little knowledge of the language of instruction. In Finland, one of the more successful countries in international education comparisons, the education system invests significantly in the first two years of primary school and considers this investment as one of the reasons for the country's high literacy rate. Class sizes are deliberately kept small and teachers continue the experiential, participatory learning of the kindergarten. During the first years of primary school, it is also usual for teachers to provide supplementary teaching and help to children who are slow in acquiring the formal reading and writing skills necessary at this stage of their education.

> **Reading and resources**
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21. Not only is the methodology suspect but disability and cognitive delays in Roma children are routinely attributed to cultural and racial factors, rather than to unattended births and the serious malnutrition of expectant and nursing mothers.
22. Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System, Article 2, paragraph 1/5.

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Like any other children, Roma children have the right to education. They are all born with talents and potential, just like other children, and are capable of succeeding and contributing to society – if they are accepted by the majority and educated in inclusive early childhood services and schools. However, many Roma children in Europe continue to face discrimination, segregation and exclusion from quality early childhood care and education (ECCE).

Inclusion from the start – Guidelines on inclusive early childhood care and education for Roma children envisions ECCE as an important stepping stone toward inclusive participation in school and society. By fostering good health, well-being, school readiness and the value of equality and living together in the early years, society can help Roma children get a good start in primary school.

These guidelines provide guidance on key themes in ECCE – such as the conceptualisation of ECCE services, agenda setting, curricular and pedagogical approaches, staff training and professional development, assessment and transition to primary education – and highlight examples of good practice. It is hoped that they will support the work of policy makers, early childhood educators and their trainers, Roma organisations, NGOs and international organisations and contribute to making a real change in the lives of young Roma children.

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