

## CHANGES IN THE EDUCATION OF RROMA CHILDREN

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### ABSTRACT

*THIS REPORT ON EDUCATIONAL SOCIOLOGY AIMS TO ANALYSE THE IMPACT OF A SPECIAL PROGRAMME CALLED "EDUCATION PILOT AREAS", DEVELOPED IN TWO SCHOOLS IN BUCHAREST, UPON THE LEARNING RESULTS OF PUPILS BELONGING PRIMARILY TO THE RROMA COMMUNITY. THE EFFICIENCY OF THIS PROGRAMME REFLECTED IN THE ENHANCED SCHOOL SUCCESS, REDUCED ABSENTEEISM AND SCHOOL ATTRITION. THESE RESULTS WERE MONITORED SIX YEARS AFTER THE PROGRAMME WAS COMPLETED AND ITS RELEVANCE CONSISTS OF ITS DEMONSTRATION OF THE NEED TO CONTINUE SUCH PROGRAMMES. THE SURVEY WAS DEVELOPED AS A SOCIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION WHICH RESULTED IN FINDINGS, PROPOSALS AND CONCLUSIONS ON THE OPPORTUNITY OF SUCH ACTIONS IN THE FUTURE. THE STUDY WAS DEVELOPED IN THE FORM OF A SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY WHERE THE METHODS USED INCLUDED QUESTIONNAIRES, INTERVIEWS, PARTICIPATIVE OBSERVATIONS AND REVIEW OF SCHOOL RECORDS.*

*THE NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR RROMA AND THE LARGE NUMBER OF EXISTING GOVERNMENTAL AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL PROGRAMMES AIMING TO RAISE THE EDUCATION LEVEL AND SPREAD IT AMONG RROMA POPULATION ARE APPLIED PRESCRIPTIVELY IN THE SENSE OF EQUALITY OF CHANCES AND POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION, AND NO MONITORING OF RESULTS WAS UNDERTAKEN. THE STRATEGY FAILS TO NOMINATE THE RESPONSIBLE ACTORS FOR IDENTIFYING FINANCIAL RESOURCES, NOR DOES IT MENTION CASES WHEN FINANCIAL RESOURCES ARE EXHAUSTED AND PROGRAMMES STOP.*

*THERE ARE BUREAUCRATIC CIRCUITS, FINANCIAL BLOCKAGES, INCONSISTENCY OF ACTIONS, OFTEN CONTRADICTORY, WHICH INTERVENE BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE. FOR INSTANCE, WHILE THE STRATEGY UNTIL 2000 PROVIDES THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SCHOOL MEDIATOR, IN PRACTICE 23 MEDIATOR POSITIONS WERE CLOSED IN BUCHAREST. THE AFTER-SCHOOL AND "SECOND CHANCE" PROGRAMMES CANNOT FIND SPONSORS, NGOS ACCESS PROGRAMMES FOR RROMA WHICH, DESPITE HAVING AN EDUCATIVE CHARACTER, ARE NOT ENDORSED BY THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, DO NOT GENERATE ANY CHANGES IN THE CURRICULUM AND DO NOT SPREAD GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES. SUCH PROGRAMMES ARE OFTEN NOT CHECKED BY EDUCATION SPECIALISTS, THOSE WHO ACCESS SUCH EUROPEAN FUNDS HAVE OTHER BACKGROUNDS AND DO NOT COLLABORATE WITH PROFESSIONALS.*

**KEYWORDS:** RROMA INTEGRATION, EDUCATION STRATEGIES, SCHOOL FAILURE, ATTRITION, POSITIVE AFFIRMATION, INVESTIGATION.

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## Introduction

The Romanian Government considered Rroma's integration by education as a national priority which is also to be found in the "Romanian Government's Strategy for Inclusion of Romanian Citizens belonging to the Rroma Minority for 2011-2020"<sup>4</sup>. This document provides the implementation of the principle of equality of chances by specific methodologies, the Rroma ethnics' access to quality education, as well as the development of human resources to prepare Rroma leaders, who in their turn are supposed to raise the collective level of Rroma citizens by culture and profession.

In my opinion the strategy is incomplete with regard to the clear definition of initial starting points, as it does not depart from a zero point and such progress cannot be monitored in the absence of references. For instance the investments made so far by the Romanian state, local administrations and NGOs are not mentioned. No references are given with respect to the degree of Rroma citizens' absorption on the labour market or to the scale of ethnic discrimination, differentiated by regions, urban - rural areas, categories of age, gender, ethnic affiliation. The strategy lacks the gender aspect of education, Rroma girls being the first to abandon school in order to get married very early and to take over domestic duties, according to tradition.<sup>5</sup>

The creation of separate classes for Rroma girls could be useful, within a "Second Chance" type programme, as the gender separation would give their parents the mentality security that girls do not interact with boys, Rroma ethnics or not; this would also give married girls the opportunity to complete their studies, to become aware of their rights, to become more up-to-date and give their children a different education.

The system of educational priority areas, which involves the principle of affirmative action, giving additional chances to children with learning difficulties and weak school results as a result of socio-economic drawbacks, was initiated in England in 1976<sup>6</sup> (EPA - Educational Priority Areas). It was then taken over by France in 1981 and afterwards developed in most member states of the European Union. The system aims to support educative actions in such areas which are an obstacle to school success. Priority Areas covered both the urban environment with marginalised population, including Rroma,

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<sup>4</sup> *The Romanian Government Strategy for Inclusion of Romanian Citizens belonging to the Rroma Minority for 2011-2020*, [www.gov.ro](http://www.gov.ro)

<sup>5</sup> Oana Baluta, Alina Dragolea and all, *Gender and political interests*, (Iasi: Polirom Publishing House, 2007)

<sup>6</sup> Unicef, Institute of Educational Sciences, Mec, *Pilot Programme*, ( Bucharest, 2004)

and rural areas. The EPA plans bring new elements with respect to the pragmatic perspective of learning, focused on practical competencies, a simplified curriculum and a practical perspective of scientific disciplines. Such actions were applied in schools no. 181 and 183 in Bucharest, which benefited from such projects, and generated positive actions.

### **Survey Stages**

The survey stages followed the course of a normal sociological survey, as follows: statement of the research hypothesis, selection of the representative sample, defining the survey methods and techniques, data collection, analysis and interpretation.

#### **1. Research hypothesis**

A change in the curriculum in the two schools, by making it more flexible, the non-discriminatory education applied by teachers who were familiar with the issues of the Roma community and the change of the non-Roma pupils' attitude and the dominating culture towards Roma have led to a school progress compared to previous years, to a drop in absenteeism and a change in the Roma's attitude towards school. The change in teachers' and Romanian pupils' mentality towards Roma pupils has led to a raise in the levels of school graduation and participation to classes.

#### **2. Sample Group**

In order to verify this hypothesis we undertook a sociological investigation in two schools in Bucharest, District 1, Aviatiei neighbourhood, namely School 181 and School 183, where a well represented Roma community is present; the investigation was undertaken based on approval by the School Inspectorate of the Municipality of Bucharest. The investigation was undertaken in October 2011 and it involved participation of 134 teachers and 90 pupils in 3 classes, one class from the VIth, VIIth and VIIIth grades respectively, with a majority of over 50% Roma children. The schools were selected from the target group sample created by the Institute of Education Sciences, MEC and UNESCO, that is, from 25% of urban area schools with a low level of material resources and a negative school ethos.

This survey was based on previous efforts, within the Pilot Intervention Programmes, materialised in the "Educational Priority Areas System" (EPA), on studies

prepared by the Ministry of Education and Research, UNICEF and the Institute of Education Sciences between 2006-2009.<sup>7</sup> The action programmes from which these schools benefited developed in the following directions: improving the material resource basis of the schools by providing them with specialised study rooms for various disciplines, with 2 computer science laboratories, new classroom furniture, and refurbishing the building and the pupils' restrooms; introducing in the school curriculum the optional subject "Roma culture and tradition"; teachers' training by specialised courses held at the Professors' House ("Casa Corpului Didactic") on fighting against discrimination, on multiculturalism and tolerance, innovative teaching strategies (attended by about 15% of the teachers in the sample group). These courses were paid for by teachers, as no funding is available for teachers' training, although they have to take a number of 90 credits every 5 years by continuous learning.

The Ministry of Education and Research and the Institute of Education Sciences offered support and auxiliary materials and the local administration supplied funds for equipping these schools. The special strategy promoted in these EPA areas aims at pupils facing a major risk of school failure, at pupils who have not attended school by the age of 10 or who have abandoned school 1-2 years ago. One particularity of this strategy is the common body with a lower number of classes and with more optional subjects at the school's discretion.

A) Roma and non-Roma pupils have been questioned within the survey, as well as the teachers who teach at these classes. We have studied the scale of ethnic discrimination, the content of school curriculum which induces discriminatory stereotypes, as well as families' interest in school matters.

B) We have analysed school records such as transcripts, register of grades, records of pupils' distribution per classes, examination result, and school infrastructure related to the equipment held by these schools as compared to other schools with Romanian pupils, as per the reports to the School Inspectorates at the end of the school year.

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<sup>7</sup> Mihaela Jigau, *Final Evaluation Report of Pilot Intervention Programmes by means of Educational Priority Areas*, UNICEF and MEC, ( Bucharest, 2006)

### 3. Investigation methods and techniques used

The sociological survey used quantitative methods such as the questionnaire, applied to pupils and teachers who teach at those classes, as well as qualitative methods, the semi-standardized interview used in the discussions with parents, the focus-group used in collective discussions with professors, the school director and secretary staff. Participative observation has also been used, by the direct participation of the researcher in normal classes and counselling classes.<sup>8</sup>

Data collection instruments were paper based, in the case of questionnaires and observation sheets, and a tape recorder was used for participation in classes and for free discussions.

4 Data collection was performed by 2 operators, and 5 (result analysis) was undertaken by a sociologist, by means of data base software.

#### Development of the survey

The 2 schools were selected based on a series of characteristics of the schools and the community.

The community of pupils in Schools 181 and 183 is characterised by severe socio-economic disadvantage, by a high level of poverty, at the sustenance limit, which affects a significant number of families. The pupils' parents have a low level of education and occupation, precarious living conditions, being concentrated in a shanty suburb inhabited by Rroma population.

Many parents have a reserved attitude towards school and the importance of education; however the local community has supported this school over the last 5 years.

Both schools face a high level of school attrition, almost 10%, and a high degree of grade repetition, almost 5%. In addition there is a significant percentage of pupils with learning difficulties.

In the first stage of the survey we applied questionnaires to teachers and pupils, followed by individual discussions, in order to identify the general characteristics of human resources, to define the professional development requirements and to review the more general issues faced by the school.

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<sup>8</sup> Babbie Earl, *The Practice of Social Research*, (Wadsworth Publishing Belmont, USA, 1992.)

A review of results from 134 teachers led to a series of interesting findings listed below.

From the total of 134 teachers in the 2 schools, all are qualified teachers, with appropriate studies for the disciplines they teach. The team of teachers was balanced in terms of age, most of them having a length of service between 18 and 25 years (57%), and more than half of them having worked in that school for 5 to 15 years. From the point of view of professional qualification more than 60% hold the teaching degrees II and I, and most of them are professors in ordinary. The gender structure is 78% women and 22 % men. These data indicate an 8% deviation from the overall human resource status in Bucharest. The error margin, higher than 5%, was an assumed limitation of the survey.

### **Teachers' opinions on the studied subject**

The discussions held with teachers revealed their perception on the problems faced by the school. Six years after the school refurbishment and the change in curriculum professors say there are no resources available to continue this direction, their salaries are demotivating, they are discontent for having to pay for themselves the tuition fees for the continuous learning courses, and are dissatisfied with pupils' performance. Almost all of them mentioned the children's difficulty to adapt to the school environment, which later on leads to school failure. In the teachers' opinion the main reasons for such difficulties are related to the family environment, considered unfavourable for the development of children's personalities, both from an economic and from an educational and affective point of view, given the lack of communication with children, the large number of families with alcohol consumption and the violent environment where children live. Another cause is the lack of access to kindergartens and to the preparatory year for Rroma children.

Another general opinion is the parents' lack of interest in school attendance, as a result of their lack of awareness of the role of education as well as of the lack of real perspectives that education is able to offer on the labour market. The precarious economic standing of Rroma families do not allow for minimum conditions (clothes, shoes), particularly during adverse weather conditions with low temperatures, snow, rain.

Teachers also list among causes the Rroma community traditions, which favour easily won money, without any systematic work, and the lack of an all round education among parents which leads them to minimise the importance of school. Such considerations may be assertive but should be listed among the causes indicated by

teachers, although they are among the stereotypes about Roma which they were taught to overcome.

Unfortunately none of the teachers indicated among the causes of school failure the lack of special educational methods, with alternative educational approaches.

The teachers believe that intuitive teaching materials would be necessary for such classes, with a visual or auditive impact, such as video-players, educational tapes, waxwork objects, educational software. All teachers interviewed believed it would be necessary to introduce an extended study programme for Roma pupils, including afternoon hours.

Teachers also believed that provision of a hot meal (snack) and free stationary would positively impact upon school attendance, given the unstable economic standing of the families and the experience from the "Bun and Milk" programme. Teachers expressed their reserves with respect to organising extra-curriculum activities to involve both parents and other members of the community, as in their opinion this would positively impact only upon a small number of parents. The main reason invoked was the lack of interest of most parents towards their children's education.

Teachers believe that the school's prestige has gradually diminished as a result of the raise in the Roma population percentage, the higher severity of economic problems following the crisis, the higher number of disorganised families due to emigration. Most teachers maintained they feel psychologically unmotivated for working in these schools.

The fact that pupils belong to different ethnic groups is not perceived as an opportunity for inter-cultural education, cultural dialogue being deficient and considered to be rather an obstacle.

At the same time teachers mentioned the lack of involvement of the Roma community in solving school's problems, as well as the non-governmental organisations that do not appear to get involved in schools. The data analysis based on the questionnaire applied to 134 teachers, of which 103 women and 31 men indicated the following data:

Question 1, referring to difficulties faced by Roma pupils, was answered by 97% of the teachers, as follows: poor school results (70%); absenteeism (60%); indiscipline (46%); lack of any connections between school and family (43%); graduation failure (41%); lack of interest for education (41%); school attrition (27%).

Poor learning results of Roma children are generated by absenteeism, the lack of relationships with the family, the lack of a tradition for intellectual work which lead to a

lack of interest in learning, to indiscipline, graduation failure and school attrition, which later on turn into violence, alcoholism and a high level of social misdemeanour.

In relation with question 2 on identifying ethnic discriminatory elements in the school curriculum, 82% of teachers said there is no discrimination, 14% maintain there is discrimination by avoidance of the issue, and 4% expressed no opinion.

In relation with question 3, on the presence of any verbal or physical conflicts among Rroma and other pupils, 63% of teachers answered positively, 31% negatively and 6% expressed no opinion.

The types of conflicts mentioned are reciprocal injuries, verbal and physical, to a smaller extent within the school. Romanian pupils ignore and isolate the Rroma pupils, while the latter try to draw attention upon themselves by shocking deeds and words. An example of frequent conflict are the references to the Rroma pupils' parents and their living conditions, the Romanian pupils repeating stereotypes learned from their families and from mass-media, the Rroma being called "lazy, dirty, ignorant, thieves".

In relation with question 4 teachers mentioned that they are more strict with respect to discipline in Rroma classes (52%) in order to prevent any misconduct, and more lax with regard to the educational content, teaching only minimal, non-performant content, given the poor learning results.

In relation with question 5, regarding a potential adjustment of the curriculum for Rroma classes, most of the teachers (80%) consider this is not necessary, due to the teachers' inertia with respect to curriculum changes and even to their hostility towards reform changes, which were often just formal. The 15% of teachers who believed that the curriculum should be changed (question 6) gave some valuable answers. These answers include: teaching in Rromani language for grades I-IV, optional courses of Rromani language and culture for Rroma classes, cultural projects, party events with specific traditional clothes, music and dance, increasing the role of the school mediator in family involvement, re-design of mathematics exercises with examples from everyday life.

They have noticed there is a hidden, subliminal curriculum, based on which pupils learn unintentionally, and a kind of social desirability is introduced. "Don't be like a gipsy", "Don't spit, don't wear dirty clothes like a gipsy", are educative phrases often used by teachers. This hidden curriculum also includes allocation of different resources, disciplinary practices, arrogance towards Rroma pupils, cloaked contempt, often



materialised in their desk placement in classrooms, these pupils being usually left to sit in the last desks.

Question 7, regarding the existence of equal chances for Rroma, was answered positively by 72% of teachers, justifying this by the places reserved for Rroma ethnics in high schools and universities, by political representation, by NGOs. Other 26% of teachers maintain that equality is only formal; the lack of economic resources being a disadvantage for them, and 2% expressed no opinion.

## **Conclusions**

1. The survey undertaken in the two schools in Bucharest indicates a better absorption of Rroma pupils and a reduction in school failure, without any significant impact upon changes in the Rroma's mentality towards school. A small progress was noticed in comparison with the previous period (2000-2005) and with the surveys undertaken in pilot schools in Giurgiu and Bacau. The fact that local authorities in Bucharest equipped these schools with better material resources and that teachers with specialised studies are employed here, with a low fluctuation in professorial chairs, who have also become more familiar with specific issues, have generated a certain progress.

2. The Rroma pupils' mentality towards school has changed in the sense that they are more motivated to complete the primary course, both girls and boys. School results remained modest, but improved in comparison with the period 2000-2005; the graduation percentage raised by 4% as compared to the period prior to this programme. Results are directly proportional to the pupils' material, hygiene and living conditions.

3. The mentalities of non-Rroma pupils towards Rroma remained unchanged, being fuelled by mass-media, by the social environment which is hostile to interculturality; such stereotypes, taken over by Rroma children themselves, are sources of future discrimination.

4. Teachers' perception of schools with Rroma pupils is negative: they are not prepared to work with these classes, they are not motivated, not enough of them have taken specialised courses for a differentiated approach, they do not value differences. Although they do not express this explicitly towards pupils, teachers have an implicit hostile or reserved attitude towards Rroma, considering them "a necessary evil".

5. Financial resources are not satisfactory, both in terms of the low wages of teachers, who have to work harder with these classes, and of lack of funding for training

courses on differentiated approaches. Special programmes for Rroma are financed only on short term, and once they are completed, things revert to the previous status.

6. The gender element of education is missing; it would be useful to set up special classes for girls who have given up school in order to get married, classes such as "Second chance" or "Parents' school" where they could continue their education.

7. I believe the school mediator positions are extremely useful, as full-time teaching staff, as well as the school counsellor positions who should direct children professionally towards traditional vocations. Right after the 8 grades graduated pupils should be included in an offer for integrated vocational school, lasting 6 months or 1 year, where they could learn a range of traditional or modern crafts such as drivers, cooks, locksmiths, with scholarships being granted so as to attract pupils.

8. The assumed deficiencies of this survey consist of the generalisation of an empirical and limited experience, as the survey was not exhaustive but instead was local, undertaken with personal resources.

9. The school's perception of Rroma pupils has only changed to a small extent, as a result of special school programmes implemented, in the sense of a better school absorption and a better awareness of specific issues related to the education of these children. Following the media coverage of these programmes, the activity of some NGOs and the EU requirements for minority integration, an important breach occurred in the theoretical consideration of this issue, which was evaded until 10 years ago. There is a long way to go between theory and practice, which should be permanently supported, regardless of political changes.

Given the objective learning progress presented by this survey, I believe the affirmative policy should be continued in a new stage, consisting of teachers' preparation for a flexible teaching approach, a change in curriculum so that Rroma pupils should feel included, a variety of optional subjects and programmes to support these children in preparing their homework and achieve performance, and, of course, funds are necessary to develop such programmes.

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