PAL   CHALLENGES & BARRIERS IN EARLY EDUCATION

"Fighting discrimination and anti-Gypsyism in education and employment in EU" (PAL)

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Challenges and Barriers in Early Education

Key words

Roma children   **social exclusion**   **multicultural education**

diversity   **preschool education**   **parental involvement**

Starting Questions:

1. Which is the educational reality of Roma children in European Union?
   - What is the role of social exclusion in early education?
   - Which are the causes of this phenomenon?
2. How cultural diversity affects on teaching and learning?
3. It is a fact that Roma children have low participation rate in early education. How can education be accessible to all Roma pupils?
4. What are the benefits of early education in psychosocial development of children?
5. What is the importance of improving family and school links?
6. What is the role of teachers in early education?

Definitions of terms:

Social exclusion:

Exclusion consists of dynamic, multi-dimensional processes driven by unequal power relationships interacting across four main dimensions - economic, political, social and cultural - and at different levels including individual, household, group, community, country and global levels. It results in a continuum of inclusion/exclusion characterized by unequal access to resources, capabilities and rights which leads to health inequalities.

Multicultural education:

Multicultural education is a philosophical concept built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity as acknowledged in various documents. It affirms the need to prepare students for their responsibilities in an interdependent world. It recognizes the role schools can play

in developing the attitudes and values necessary for a democratic society. It values cultural differences and affirms the pluralism that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. It challenges all forms of discrimination in schools and society through the promotion of democratic principles of social justice.

Stereotype:

A stereotype is a preconceived notion, especially about a group of people. Many stereotypes are racist, sexist, or homophobic. Some stereotypes: Irish people are all drunks, or African-American people are always late, or women are bad drivers. Stereotypes commonly held ideas about specific groups. We often hear about negative stereotypes, but some are positive. For example, there's a stereotype that Asian people do better in school. One of many problems with any stereotype is that even if it's true in some cases, it's certainly not true in all cases.

Diversity:

The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies. It is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual.

Nomadic:

A nomad is someone who lives by traveling from place to place. Nomadic thus means anything that involves moving around a lot. You don't have to be a nomad to live a nomadic lifestyle. People who work for the state department travel from foreign country to foreign country in four – year postings––they might call this nomadic. If you change schools a lot because of your parents' moves, you could say you've had a nomadic education.

Content of the Chapter

1.   Roma educational achievement has been historically poor across Europe. While considerable advances were made in the socialist period, the disadvantage of Roma children, manifest in every aspect of schooling, never disappeared and has only worsened over the last two decades. Preschool coverage for Roma children in South – Eastern Europe (SEE) is low, ranging from 0.2 % in Kosovo

to 17% in Romania. This lack of access has been identified by the Roma NGO s as a major contributing factor in the educational failure of Roma across the region. According to World Bank data, educational enrolment in CSEE among primary-school age Roma children is on average a quarter of the corresponding rate for non-Roma children. In SEE, gaps in enrolment are the greatest in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, ranging from 45% to 50%. Some 20% of Roma children in Bulgaria and 33% in Serbia never go to school. According to recent multiple indicator cluster surveys, of the 63% of Roma children who enter primary school in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, only 45% complete it; in Serbia, only 13% of Roma complete primary school. A survey conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that two out of three Roma do not complete primary school, as compared with one in seven in majority communities. As a result of the high drop-out rate among Roma children, their participation beyond primary school is dramatically lower than that of the majority population. In SEE, for example, only 18% of Roma attend secondary school, compared with 75% of the majority community, and lower than 1% of Roma attend university.

- Many Roma children live in conditions of poverty that create barriers to access to education. It has become increasingly common for children to abandon their education to help with economic activities. Roma boys tend to operate in the informal sector, while girls stay home to attend to children and chores. In other cases, children may need to leave school because the family migrates for work. Other barriers, such as living in remote, isolated and crowded Roma settlements, also impede access to quality education. Crowded settings and the lack of amenities deter the acquisition of basic hygiene habits and hinder the completion of homework. In some cases, especially for girls, cultural and social pressures from within Roma communities hinder access. For some Roma women, early marriage and pregnancy reduce their opportunities for education. Additional characteristics, such as the scarcity of books or lack of adequate lighting and table space in the home, linguistic barriers, and a lack of academic support outside of school make it hard for Roma children to fit into the school structure. This is especially the case in the absence of preschool. The inflexibility of school systems to accommodate these circumstances exacerbates these barriers and compounds the children's exclusion. Moreover, schools that do not consider the child and their needs as a whole may overlook socio-economic and nutritional issues, such as the fact that many Roma children go to school hungry. The disadvantaged status and marginalization of many parents within the Roma community means they not only lack resources to access adequate nutrition and health care, but many may also lack the basic education and knowledge of

fundamental health and nutritional principles necessary to help facilitate their children's development and transition to regular primary school.

- As main causes of the phenomenon of social exclusion of Roma in early education, could be mentioned:

  ➢ Nomadic way of life.

  ➢ Roma's rejection about the value of the educational process and the benefits that be offered.

  ➢ Language difficulties (Roma people are bilingual, native Romani language and a second language, the language of the country they live in).

  ➢ The stereotypical attitude of school environment towards them.

  ➢ Lack of acceptance by the wider social environment towards them.

  ➢ Lack of national policies for education of population groups with cultural differences.

2.   The role of education is to handle people's cultural diversity occurring within every classroom setting. Every classroom nowadays is characterized by ethnical, linguistic, gender, social, cultural…diversity. Because of this diversity there are significant difficulties with teaching and learning approaches which means school as a context can be boring and non understandable for Roma children. That happens because teaching procedures are far from their culture and their way of living and this has as a result their absence of (from??) school environment.

3.   A possible solution is to apply the methods of multicultural education. The role of multicultural and intercultural education comes in to reduce excessive differences that exist between individuals of different ethnicities and cultures. It is impossible to educate only a spirit or another, without taking into account the multicultural social context in which they come from and where children will return. School is a small social group and it recreates one small scale society as a whole. Multicultural education involves different things for different people, and that all attempts to conceptualize this form of education share four characteristics: 1) All are based on a common set of assumptions; 2) It grows outside joint educational concerns; 3) They contain joint directions for action; 4) They share a desire to make cultural pluralism and ethnic differences integral part of the educational process.

4.   A preschool – age child's most pressing question is often "why?". Children's minds are constantly working and processing, and as they grow older and become more mature and learn more about the world, they're able to better process and understand the things that they do, hear and see. Preschools are designed to stimulate a child's cognitive development and interest in learning at this exciting age. In recent decades, studies have shown that Early Childhood Education (ECD) is critical in preparing children to enter and succeed in the (grade school) classroom, diminishing their risk of social – emotional mental health problems and increasing their self – sufficiency as adults. The child needs to be taught to rationalize everything and to be open to interpretations and critical thinking. The role of preschool is to strengthen child's psychosocial development with the intention to provide: 1) A better understanding of their own personality; 2) Raise awareness in the understanding of others; 3) Ability to perceive and understand multiple, diverse conflicts, and interpret them; 4) Ability to make decisions and act on it; 5) Open mind to possible new claims; 6) Understand the process of stereotyping, low maintenance of stereotypical thinking, pride in themselves and respect for others.

5.   Families are the first educators of their children and they continue to influence their children's learning and development during the school years and long afterwards. Schools need to recognize the primary role of the family in education. Research demonstrates that effective schools have high levels of parental and community involvement. This involvement is strongly related to improved student learning, attendance and behavior. Family involvement can have a major impact on student learning, regardless of the social or cultural background of the family. This can be successful by making equally valuable contributions with all parents; by respecting Roma children and their families needs and preferences; by exploring and understanding the causes of the negative attitude of Roma parents towards the educational system; by operating programs in order to understand the dynamic development of Roma community; by eliminating the fears / stereotypes and prejudices (which covers the education process) of Roma population; by implementing programs/ activities referred to Roma families who have children in preschool; by addressing barriers to involvement in schools by families and actively help previously uninvolved families to become involved; by giving to families appropriate opportunities to contribute to school decision – making and governance; The link between school and parents can be summarized in seven (7) dimensions: 1) communicating; 2)

connecting learning at home and at school; 3) building community and identity; 4) recognizing the role of the family; 5) consultative decision – making; 6) collaborating beyond the school and 7) participating.

6.   The role of teacher in early education is very important. The teacher can help in the educational process: by exploring and respecting the diversity; by accepting the cultural identity of Roma; by exchanging views and relationships between teachers, families and Roma community; by ensuring the implementation of European Legislation on the education of Roma children, via actions to identify and remove any barriers and inhibitors on all sides, for registration and attendance of Roma students in preschool education; by co – operating and coexisting teachers and Roma community; by ensuring quality in the treatment of Roma children in the educational environment.

Questions for thinking

1. How the Parents and Guardians Association of a school could approach Roma parents in order to get involved in decisions concerning school matters?

2. How counseling groups for children could help in their interpersonal relationships or/and in Roma's children integration at the school environment?

3. Which are the good practices on diversity that experts (e.g. psychologists, counselors) could apply working with children in group context?

4. How the diversity in the school environment can affect on the psychosocial development of the child?

5. How can teaching in inclusive and multicultural environments be more productive for Roma children?

6. How Roma culture can be accepted by the European school system?

7. How can teachers work and children learn in a bilingual teaching environment?

8. How can European Commission promote positive strategies for tolerance and tackling discriminatory behavior?

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9. How National Organizations for Roma could create a network in order to the society be aware of Roma culture and identity?

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