

Breaking the Spiral: a Roma Education initiative

This paper describes Roma children as being trapped in a downward spiral of disempowerment and disadvantage. Its analysis lays a major part of the blame for this state of affairs at the door of present educational policies and practices within the countries of the Region. The paper proposes a programme of action - focussing on educational intervention and on literacy – designed to set this right. This Programme is organised into three fields of activity: policy development, programmes targeted directly at the components of the problem; and support activity. The paper also considers a range of practical problems associated with the process of implementation.

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1. This paper recognises that for the overwhelming majority of young Roma the current processes of schooling in most countries of our Region, instead of being a liberating and empowering process, is driving successive generations downwards in an accelerating spiral of disempowerment and deprivation. This paper explores ways of changing this state of affairs. It sets out to identify, then pull together, the components of a strategy designed to have a significant impact on the quality of educational opportunity available to Roma people in our region by the year 2010.
2. Any program designed to set this state of affairs right will have to overcome two broad sets of problems. The first set relates to those schooling processes which have led to the establishment of a spiral of educational failure, underachievement and social alienation – particularly in certain sectors of society. These problems are far from unique to Roma communities, nor to Central Europe. They are well recognised in connection with other social groupings in a wide range of contexts (African–American communities in the USA; sectors of the indigenous, and immigrant, communities in the inner cities of Western Europe). Much is already well known about what constitute effective - and ineffective - ways of tackling such problems. The second, and less tractable, set of problems clusters around the unique aspects of the specifics of the situation of Roma as ethnic, social and cultural minorities enjoying, not-infrequently, difficult relationships with the majority cultures and societies within which they are located. These problems often manifest themselves within the minority community as uncertainty in the face of, and occasionally direct opposition towards, those processes of change which will, inevitably, impact on their present patterns of life and culture. This latter point can be perceived as especially threatening – and therefore provokes particular opposition - if the changes are perceived as originating from outside their own communities.
3. It is generally true that the position of the overwhelming majority of citizens with Roma minority affiliations in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe has worsened since the changes of 1989/90. The victories of democracy over totalitarianism have had their negative as well as their positive consequences in the countries of the Region. The collapse of the structures and certainties of the old regimes have worsened the social and material plight of many of those least equipped to face the challenges of a new – and often corrupt - market economy. The absence of good governance and the weakness of the institutions of a civil society in the countries of the region has seen, in places, the emergence of forms of raw, unregulated social and economic Darwinism of a sort which would have shocked Adam Smith profoundly. And, as always in such circumstances, it is the weakest who have paid the highest price. Freedom has meaning only if it presents an individual with choices. The experience of the majority of Roma has been entirely the opposite of freedom. They have been disempowered, discriminated against, and, where it was possible to do so, frequently entirely disregarded as citizens with a share in, and with a responsibility for, their own society.
4. A number of forces have been at work in this process, but one of the most profound and far reaching in its effect has been the processes of discrimination at work – often at all levels, from Ministry to classroom – in the schooling system. In the saddest of ironies, the system of schooling in many countries of our Region currently operates in ways that increase deprivation rather than work towards equity of opportunity. This must be changed. This paper sets out one

way in which this might be done.

5. The Roma Education Initiative should have two goals. One is negative in operation, the other positive. They are:
 - the elimination of discriminatory processes in the school systems of relevant countries in the Region; and,
 - the establishment, through positive interventions - especially in the area of early schooling and literacy, of the conditions necessary to enable Roma children to participate in the teaching-learning process on equal terms with their peers.

6. These goals will not be easily achieved. It will be difficult enough to tackle the overt, institutionalized forms of discrimination (such as segregation). But the more covert attitudes, behaviors and educational practices that are discriminatory by their results (such as assimilatory expectations, or decreased quality of education) must also be crucial targets for change. Beyond that, the task of designing and delivering quality interventions on a scale commensurate with the nature and extent of the problem represents a significant challenge for the network. If this initiative is to be undertaken, the case for a coherent strategy and for effective, and sensitive, planning is strong. Early considerations of such strategy issues indicate that it may be helpful to identify three distinct, though mutually supportive fields of activity. These fields are:
 - supporting the development and monitoring of appropriate **educational policies** at national and local level;
 - mounting an interlocking series of **projects directly targeted** at issues of access and enablement – especially literacy; and,
 - tackling a range of **underpinning problems** – particularly those related to language – which presently impede the impact of operational projects.

7. **Educational Policy Development:** It is the current state of national and local educational policies in countries of our Region which – by omission and commission – allows and fuels the processes of discrimination in school and classroom. We therefore need instruments that will act directly on these policies to bring about change. Fortunately, a sound basis on which to develop such instruments already exists in the form of the embryonic OSI Policy Paper on the Education of Minorities. Though the policy does not focus specifically on Roma, it does highlight this minority, and puts into place a framework of ideas and guiding principles upon which foundations may build a strategy and program portfolio to support Roma as well as other minorities. This guiding paper was a necessary first step in moving towards a network-wide approach. The paper itself will be developed into a suite of supporting papers which will directly address the relevant problems. These will include:
 - a checklist against which governments and local education authorities could evaluate their current policies for impact, positive and negative, on the problem;
 - a checklist against which Ministries could evaluate their national curriculum guidelines and text-books;
 - a checklist against which schools could evaluate their current policies and practices in the field of Roma education;
 - a checklist against which teachers could evaluate their current classroom practices;

- support for Roma community leaders and for schools, for an discussion process designed to engage communities and their schools around this process; and,
- arrangements for national and local monitoring of discrimination in education.

These actions would all require support to be offered in the form of consultancy and training programmes in order to establish them in a form which would ensure penetration of the policies into the system. All actions should also include quality indicators and evaluation criteria.

8. **Projects directly targeted at the problem.** The second level is one of direct action. Such action would take the shape of an interlocking series of operational projects designed to tackle issues of access and enablement. These projects would cover several goals: increasing access to early childhood education; improving quality in formal schooling; transforming levels of early literacy; and increasing the effectiveness of education in terms of basic learning skills and attitudes. An indicative plan of action has been developed and attached as ANNEX A.

There are two approaches to the implementation of such an action plan: a “Network Program” approach, or a “Network Support” approach. The former is typified in existing network programs such as Step By Step, or Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking: the latter has been the chosen mode of operation of IEP in the more generic fields of its operation. In a Network Program approach, project activities would be coordinated and organized from either New York or Budapest. As in other Network Programs, technical assistance would be arranged for each of the components. The Network Support approach would involve working individually with Foundations to plan the components as a whole and within their overall education strategy. Though each component would remain consistent, the implementation plan and technical support provided might vary from country to country. The choice of the most appropriate overall approach should be a matter for early consideration at network level.

Taking into account the above mentioned goals and the complex set of factors that contribute to the school failure of Roma children, possible areas of action are:

- the development of a coherent early-intervention program drawing on a range of early childhood education programs and focussed on areas where Roma populations are high;
- a concentration on the early and universal achievement of functional literacy as being a major enabling factor in educational achievement;
- the development of a whole school approach to change, including, anti-bias education, changing management styles, changing organisational values, the school as an organisation developing flexibility to meet different patterns of needs;
- the development of teacher training programs and training of trainers for early childhood and primary education focussed on this issue;
- emancipation and dissemination of Roma culture;
- public awareness campaigns, anti-discrimination campaigns, anti-bias education;
- the development of textbooks and other teaching materials which are meaningful for Roma children; and,
- building capacity and support for unbiased pupil performance assessment at the primary level.

9. Laying foundations. The third level of action sets out to ensure the development of the foundations for effective action at the second level. This would include consideration of:

- the development of a standardized version of Romani language, and linguistic research on language usage in Roma communities and the description of dialects;
- support for research in other education related areas such as the use of appropriate pedagogies; and,
- the case for documentation of local Roma cultures and Roma arts, drama and literature in ways which will contribute to level two activities.

10. Implementation. The development of a detailed strategy and a realistic implementation plan for the initiative described in this paper presents major challenges. It would be foolish to ignore the entrenched nature of the prejudices and attitudes which underpin, and which flow from, present educational practices. These are not problems which will be easily nor quickly solved. Nor will they respond to a marginal redeployment of effort. There are, however, some factors beginning to act in a positive direction. One of the most important is the emphasis being put on minority issues by the EU in its consideration of requests for accession from countries of the Region. This has, and will increasingly, focus the attentions of regional governments on this issue. There are few matters which governments find more motivating than issues that might present barriers to EU accession. Another positive factor involves a recognition of the range of good work already going on in the OSI Network, and with other NGO's, in this field. Many of the pieces of this strategy are already there – they simply need pulled into place, linked and co-ordinated. The final cause for hope is the scale of the problem. This is not a universal issue. It is relatively precisely located in geographical terms and it is – on the regional scale of things – limited in scope and scale. Given the right strategy, our resources would more than match up to the problem.

There would be, of course, three groups of partners in such an initiative. The first group is represented by school system at all levels - from national government to the school directors and teachers. The tactics for tackling this group have been outlined already. The second group is the bodies of the OSI network and our partner NGO's. This group is already active: their efforts simply require integration and, if necessary, scaling up. The third group presents more of a problem. It will be absolutely essential to secure the active partnership of the Roma communities – particularly of parents. This problem should not be underestimated. It may be that a major part of the effort of the initiative might have to be deployed, in the first instance, into this area. One possibly effective tactic would be to present the whole initiative under a banner such as “Targeting Literacy!” Such tactics would be a matter for careful consideration. Presentational issues are vital.

11. Finally, we should remind ourselves that this is an area of profound need. Not only are we presented with a manifestation of human prejudice and action at their worst, but the very institutions of society – the schooling systems and government social policy - are acting to aggravate the difficulties. Many of the component parts giving rise to this problem are outside the scope of this paper. The schooling system is not however, and, according to the analysis of this paper, the problems clustered around the role of schools are susceptible to solution within available resources – given an appropriate strategy and a coordinated approach. There does seem to exist an opportunity.

Given commitment and leadership, our two goals could realistically be achieved by the year 2010. The first step would be the dismantling of the present entrapping spiral of disadvantage and discrimination; this could be achieved in the early part of the initiative. The second step would take longer and would involve focused action, probably under the banner of an early intervention and

literacy campaign. Together, these steps would transform the system of schooling from being an instrument of discrimination and disadvantage into a means of empowerment and a way towards the enjoyment of freedom and opportunity by all Roma children in the Region by the year 2010.

ANNEX A

This annex presents an indicative plan for the second field of activities – the program of direct actions - which may be undertaken. This indicative program sets out to respect both the complexity and the importance of the central issue of ensuring educational success for Roma. If Roma children are to really succeed in school, then all of the components set out in this note must be targeted and developed. To focus on just one or two, would be to flaw the strategy, and would most likely lead to failure.

The “core” components are the following: Curriculum development, School Improvement, Language, Teacher Training, Parent Involvement, and Assessment.

1. Curriculum Development: This component will work on reforming curriculum in countries. Concepts of anti-bias, multiculturalism, and multiple abilities will be developed. Out of this framework, educational materials will be developed– for the ages covered in the program - which include or cover topics such as Roma history, culture, and language, and multicultural or inclusive themes. These materials once created may be used in mixed and dominant classrooms as well. Bilingual books may be created to teach the dominant language and this component will be linked to the **Language Component** below. Training may consist of writing workshops, support for groups of writers and illustrators and all trainings would incorporate anti-bias ideals along with methodological training. The publishing program may be brought in on working with local publishing to have the books distributed nationally in countries.

For textbooks that are produced in history, sociology and related subjects, courses may be organized for authors in cooperation with publishers in anti-bias education, and authors writing seriously on Roma history and issues for upper primary grades should be supported to incorporate the work into textbook writing. Foundations may play a key role organizing a training seminar for publishers on anti-bias education, or by offering a tender for the creation of such a textbook. Foundations may offer to pay for fixed costs and a guaranteed number of purchased books in order to raise interest in the publishing industry.

2. School Improvement: A whole school approach must be an integral component to improving education for Roma, as often it is the rigid culture of schools that lead to school failure for Roma students. This component would support a shift in leadership approach, and management and organizational style from a monocultural, hierarchical one to a multicultural, horizontal one. In addition to the leadership training, schools will also be provided with introduction to Romani language, history and culture as well as anti-bias training.

Because the supporting institutions are integral to the school success of Roma pupils, part of this program could focus on reaching out and cooperation with supporting educational institutions, which would receive the same training as school staff.

3. Language: Language is often one of the most difficult barriers blocking Roma children’s success in school. The language component may be integrated into all the other components of the program. For materials creation for bilingual children, native speakers of the local Romani dialects will be consulted and included in the writing process. In School Improvement and Teacher Training, educators will be trained in a better knowledge of the language children speak at home, its origins, and linguistically, the difficulties this presents for children in the learning process. It would also be

useful for interested teachers to learn the local Romani dialect and to incorporate it into the classroom as a tool for learning the dominant language. For parent involvement, it is vital that the school recognizes the Romani language as equal to the majority language, and using language, there are many concrete techniques for approaching families to become involved in the school without feeling threatened. Since language usage is a prime barrier to successful testing of Romani children, assessment instruments would have to be looked at from a language perspective and bias, and rethought.

4. Teacher Training: The teacher-training component may be multi-layered. Foundations that are already running successful teacher training programs such as Step-by-Step or Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking should extend this training to target those schools targeted by the initiative. In addition, other training would be incorporated: anti-bias training, Roma language, culture and history, complex instruction (which instructs how to teach children with different abilities in one classroom). Of course, a train the trainer approach would be designed into this component.

6. Parent Involvement: As with all components of this initiative, parental involvement is a piece which can not be ignored. Historically, Roma have had little reason to trust schools as institutions of the majority. In past political regimes, education has been a system of power of the majority, and Roma have a history of persecution from that majority. Today, the situation is still very far from equal; since the Second World War, Roma have consistently been tracked to segregated schools and classrooms. Acceptance and trust between Roma and educational institutions is the essential prerequisite for change. These partnerships have the potential to nurture literacy and academic achievement in the schools, while validating and celebrating students' home culture and language. The focus of parent involvement should not be on teaching parents the regulations of school, but giving parents the opportunity to get to know and have input in school. The use of interpreters may be necessary between the teachers and the parents to facilitate communication.

6. Assessment: The tracking of Roma students to special schools and classes is largely the result of biased testing. Many countries have "committees" which examine children for placement. This component would focus on anti-bias training for committee examiners, and would work with the institutions responsible for creating, overseeing and administering examinations to rethink and recreate their testing for Romani children. Activity of this sort is already happening in the Czech Republic. This component could build upon activity already happening in the field, develop it further, and spread to a larger number of countries.