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The situation of Roma School Mediators and Assistants in Europe

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Introduction

This report presents the results of an analysis developed in the framework of Council of Europe's project "Education for Roma Children in Europe" as a continuation of the activities on Roma mediators and assistants initiated in 2004: the organisation of a European seminar on this topic in Timisoara, in April 2004, in partnership with the Intercultural Institute, and the publication of a first report on this topic, based on the presentations and discussion during the seminar.

Indeed, the recommendation No R(2000)4 adopted by the Committee of Ministers in February 2000, the document that sets the basis for all the activities of the project, mentions twice the idea of "*using mediators from the Roma/Gypsy community*" in the context of the communication between school and parents and in order "*to ease the contacts between Roma/Gypsy, the majority population and schools and to avoid conflicts at school*".

The conclusions of the seminar organised in Timisoara and the publication that followed emphasise the various approaches taken in several European countries on the use of Roma school mediators and assistants as well as the need for providing a European framework and support from the Council of Europe in the form of a Guide of Roma School Mediator.

But, before the development of such a tool, it appeared necessary to have a more complete view on the current status in all the member states of the Council of Europe with regards to the implementation of the provisions of the Recommendation R(2000)4 on the use of Roma mediators and assistants. The aim of the present document is to offer such a view, based both on an enquiry made among the educational authorities of the member states and on additional research.

Methodology and process of data collection

In order to have a more comprehensive view on the situation of Roma mediators and assistants across Europe, a questionnaire has been elaborated and sent in English and French to the educational authorities of the member states in March 2005. The questionnaire was also translated into Romani and sent to various Roma organisations and other NGOs working on Roma education.

The questionnaire, presented in annex, contains 17 questions, closed and open, focused on the following issues:

No	Issue	Question(s)
1	Existence of the Roma School Mediator / Roma Assistant or any other similar position in the respective country	1
2	The terminology used to designate the position in the local language and in French/English	2
3	The legal framework regulating the employment of mediators/assistants (if any)	3
4	The tasks / functions and responsibilities of the mediator / assistant	4 and 5
5	Who initiated the employment of members of Roma/Gypsy community to improve education for Roma/Gypsy children	6
6	Current situation regarding the institutional framework, recruitment procedures, numbers, trends)	7 to 10
7	Initial and in-service training programmes available for Roma/Gypsy mediators/assistants	11 and 12
8	Monitoring procedures and support for the activities of Roma/Gypsy mediators/assistants	13 and 14
9	Request for reporting initiatives / projects related to the employment of Roma/Gypsy mediators/assistants	15
10	Request for reporting initiatives/projects concerning the use of other categories of staff with mediation functions for Roma/Gypsy and the employment of intercultural mediators in general or for other cultural communities than Roma/Gypsy	16-17

Only 19 countries returned the questionnaire filled-in. In all cases, except 2, the answers were provided by the national educational authorities. In the case of Czech Republic the answers were given by an NGO that has concrete and longstanding experience on this matter while in the case of Ukraine the information was obtained from a Roma organisation with the support of the European Roma and Travellers Forum. In some cases, the answers were obtained through an employee of the educational authorities in charge with Roma education, while in other cases they were elaborated by several ministry employees (e.g. for primary and secondary education) or by an ad-hoc committee made of experts and Roma representatives.

This process faced a number of difficulties, such as:

- language accessibility : in some cases the questionnaire had to be translated into the local language in order to become accessible to the persons knowledgeable about the topic, in other cases, the additional documents were attached in the original language
- access to information : particularly in countries without a national policy on Roma education it was hard for the employees of the national educational authorities to report about local initiatives or about initiatives of NGOs

- difficulties specific to the education systems in countries with federal systems, where the policies and experiences may vary between the federal units.

Therefore, besides the information contained in the questionnaires returned, in order to complete the picture, both in the sense of including all relevant countries and in the sense of providing a more complete picture of some countries with significant experiences, the analysis below relies also on bibliographical and internet research, as well as on the testimonies of the participants to Timisoara seminar from April 2004. However, it should be noted that the information contained in this document might not cover all the relevant initiatives and that some information is incomplete.

	Countries that returned the questionnaires
1	Austria
2	Czech Republic
3	Cyprus
4	Estonia
5	France
6	FYROM
7	Germany
8	Greece
9	Hungary
10	Ireland
11	Lithuania
12	Luxembourg
13	Malta
14	Netherlands
15	Norway
16	Spain
17	Slovenia
18	UK
19	Ukraine

Countries about which additional information was found
Albania
Belgium
Bosnia & Herzegovina
Bulgaria
Croatia
Denmark
Finland
Italy
Latvia
Moldova
Poland
Portugal
Romania
Serbia and Montenegro
Slovakia
Sweden

Analysis of results

We combine in the analysis the content of the questionnaires returned with the data obtained from other sources in order to give a broader picture of the current situation on this matter at European level. The structure of the presentation corresponds to the main issues targeted through the questionnaire. A more in-depth analysis will be made of the situation in several countries that accumulated an experience on this matter or that initiate now projects or programmes in this respect.

Existence of the Roma mediator / assistant

The first question was about the existence of persons “from the Roma/Gypsy community” employed with the task “to facilitate communication between teachers and Roma/Gypsy families and/or to improve access to school and increase the chances of success at school for Roma/Gypsy children”. The question did not name the position of such persons (i.e. “mediators” or “assistants”) in order to leave the respondents free to refer to any specific title in their countries. This was also a ramification question as in case of a “NO” answer, the respondent was directed towards question 15 and the following, requesting information about other experiences that could be relevant.

Questionnaires returned

	COUNTRY	Roma mediators / assistants	Comments
1	Austria	Yes, Roma mediators and assistants	Differences between the regions
2	Czech Republic	Yes, formerly Roma Teaching Assistant, now Educator/Assistant of Teacher	Official programme of the Ministry of Education
3	Cyprus	No	Specialised educational staff
4	Estonia	No, according to authorities, yet local initiative of Roma NGO with EU support	Project to reduce drop-out without involving mediators/assistants Participation in a EU-funded project
5	France	Yes, Roma mediator	At local level and with a marginal status
6	FYROM	No	Common ongoing project of International NGOs, OSCE and USAID
7	Germany	No answer possible	Ethnic identification questioned
8	Greece	No	Recent project
9	Hungary	Yes, pedagogical assistant / Roma family coordinator	Governmental project/ NGO initiative
10	Ireland	No	Other experiences and projects for the near future
11	Lithuania	Yes, Roma assistant	Governmental project
12	Luxembourg	No	No
13	Malta	No Roma	No Roma
14	Netherlands	No	Recent project
15	Norway	No	Interest based on work with Roma refugees
16	Spain	YES, Roma mediators	NGOs initiatives supported by public authorities
17	Slovenia	No	Recently adopted strategy envisages employment of Roma assistants in schools
18	UK	Yes, teaching assistant / learning support assistant	Employed by Local Educational Authorities
19	Ukraine	No	No

Information from other sources

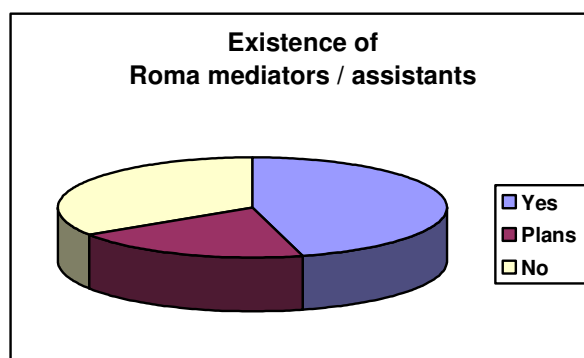
	COUNTRY	Roma mediators / assistants	Comments on current situation
1	Albania	No	No
2	Belgium	No	Intercultural mediators
3	Bosnia & Herzegovina	No	No
4	Bulgaria	Yes, Roma Teaching Assistant	Piloted by NGOs, expanded as part of a PHARE project
5	Croatia	Yes, Roma Teaching Assistant	Part of the National Strategy for improvement of the situation of Roma
6	Denmark	Yes, Roma mediators	Introduced in a EU-funded project
7	Finland	Yes, Roma mediator	Training by the National Board of Education. Limited employment by local authorities and NGOs
8	Italy	Yes, Roma mediator	Local initiatives. Experience also on intercultural mediators
9	Latvia	Yes, Roma teacher assistant	Pilot NGO project in cooperation with educational authorities
10	Moldova	No	No
11	Poland	Yes, Roma teaching assistant	Governmental programme piloted in one region
12	Portugal	No	Experiences of intercultural mediators
13	Romania	Yes, Roma school mediator	Piloted by NGOs, expanded as part of a PHARE project
14	Serbia and Montenegro	No	Serbia: Roma assistants mentioned in the Strategy adopted in 2003. Montenegro: recently, Roma assistants are part of a national action plan
15	Slovakia	Yes, Teacher's Assistant	Official programme of the Ministry of Education
16	Sweden	Yes, Roma mediator	Isolated local experiences

Existence of Roma Mediators/Assistants

Situation	Countries	No
Countries with established and functioning Roma mediators/assistants or with pilot experiences in this area	Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, UK	16
Countries with current/envisaged projects/plans/strategies regarding Roma mediators/assistants	FYROM, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovenia	7
Countries without Roma mediators/assistants	Albania, Belgium, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Portugal, Ukraine	12

It can be assumed that the remaining member states of the Council of Europe targeted by this investigation (Russia, Turkey, the countries in the Caucasus region and a few very small countries) do not have experiences of employing Roma mediators or assistants, nor any plans for doing so in the near future at least at the official level.

The situation is very dynamic. Some of the countries that now have only plans of establishing positions of Roma mediators/assistants will be soon included in the first category. A majority of countries use the term “Roma Teaching Assistants”, while 7 countries out of 16 use “Roma mediator”. Most of the countries that have plans in this respect envisage using the term “Roma Teaching Assistant”.



The following table illustrates the time span of the first initiatives related to the use of Roma mediators/assistants in the various countries:

	COUNTRY	Years when projects/programmes concerning Roma mediators / assistants were initiated	Comments
1	Austria	Oberwart 1991 / Wien 1994	Initiated by a Roma NGO
2	Bulgaria	1998 pilot initiative 2001 expansion	Roma NGO EU-funded national Ministry project
3	Croatia	2000	Small numbers, employed by Educational Authorities
4	Czech Republic	1993 pilot initiative 1998 expansion 2000 new regulations	NGOs (non-Roma & Roma) + school Recognition by authorities
5	Finland	1994, first trainings 2001 – 2004 expansion	National Board of Education Coordination of European project
6	France	Mid-1990s	Roma NGO, local authorities and education system
7	Hungary	2001, for Roma Family Coordinators unknown date for Pedagogical assistants	NGO initiative Local authorities + Ministry of Employment
8	Italy	1996	Local authorities
9	Latvia	2003	Pilot project at small scale
10	Lithuania	2002	Socrates – Comenius project
11	Poland	2001, initiation 2004 national expansion	Regional authorities + NGO training Government programme
12	Romania	1996 pilot experiences 2003 expansion	NGO (Roma & non Roma) initiative Within EU-funded national project implemented by Ministry of Education
13	Slovakia	1994 pilot initiatives 2001 national expansion	NGO projects Ministry of Education EU-funded project and new legal framework
14	Spain	1980s	At local and regional level
15	Sweden	2001	Socrates – Comenius project
16	UK	1990	Local Educational Authorities

Legal and institutional framework

In some countries the employment of Roma mediators/assistants started in the 1980s and 1990s. Spain, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Finland, France and Romania are some examples. The initiation of the use of Roma mediators/assistants has been made in most of the countries in this category at the initiative of NGOs. In several countries of Central Europe an important role in this respect has been played by the organisations member of the Open Society Foundation network. A few years later, in some cases local authorities, in other cases educational authorities have taken up the idea and either provided support for NGO activities or integrated the mediator/assistant in their respective institutional framework¹.

An important evolution took place after the year 2000 when, on one side, the Recommendation of the Council of Europe was adopted and, on the other side, most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe elaborated, with the support of the European Commission, national strategies for the improvement of the situation of Roma that included measures in the field of education. Among these measures, most countries included the idea of employment and training of Roma mediators or assistants. During the next years, the number of Roma mediators / assistants increased significantly in these countries through the trainings and activities organised in the framework of national PHARE projects, funded by the European Commission and associated with the above-mentioned strategies.

The numbers of Roma mediators/assistants vary widely among the countries and that is not necessarily associated with the number of Roma that live in the respective countries. In some cases there are just 2-3 Roma mediators/assistants, as part of a pilot NGO initiative or of the policy of a local authority, while in other cases there are hundreds of permanent positions, the highest reported number being in Bulgaria, where around 500 Roma assistants are employed.

The employer can be the education system (educational authorities or schools, depending on the level of centralisation in the education system), a local or regional authority or an NGO. While ten years ago NGOs were the main employers of mediators/assistants, the number of Roma mediators/assistants employed by the education system and by the local authorities has increased very much in the last five years in many countries. Several countries, such as the new EU members from Central Europe, Romania, Bulgaria, but also Finland, Denmark or Sweden, are now confronted with the challenge of ensuring the sustainability of the employment and training of Roma mediators/assistants after important progress done over the previous years within EU-funded national (PHARE in the case of Central and Eastern European countries / European Social Fund, in the case of “old” EU member countries) or transnational projects (e.g. Socrates, Equal). The salary of the mediators/assistants is below the lowest salary of a teacher or of a social worker, usually closer to the minimum salary, but there are also cases, such as the project planned in the Netherlands, when the salary of the assistant is higher than the minimum salary, closer to the salary of a primary school teacher.

The decision to employ a Roma mediator/assistant is in most cases left to the educational authorities or to the school directors. In some cases, such as Slovakia, there are explicit criteria that are used to determine whether a school is allowed to employ an assistant. In other cases the decision is taken by the local authorities. The monitoring, supervision and support of the Roma mediators/assistants is provided in some cases by specialised educational authorities (e.g. Inspectors for Roma in Romania), by school management and in other cases by local authorities.

¹ It is interesting to note that in most cases the educational authorities that filled-in the questionnaire did not know about the initiators of the employment of Roma assistants/mediators and about the period of the first pilot experiences in this respect.

Tasks and responsibilities

Three categories of tasks can be identified:

- tasks related to the work in the classroom: facilitating communication between teachers and Roma children, particularly helping Roma children to understand the instructions given by teachers, and supporting them in accomplishing the educational activities
- tasks related to the work with Roma children outside the classroom activities, including preparation for school, support for homework and organisation of leisure and cultural activities
- tasks related to the facilitation of the relations between school and Roma families and the Roma community in general.

In some cases, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Poland, Roma teaching assistants have in their job profile all these three categories of tasks. Sometimes, like in the case of the “Lernhelfers” in Austria, their activity is limited to the second category, while in other cases, such as the Roma school mediators in Romania, the Roma mediators in Spain or in France, their job profile includes mainly the second and the third category of tasks.

A typical example corresponding to the first category of extensive job profile is the case of Slovakia. The tasks of a Teacher’s Assistant are:

1. In connection with the teaching process:
 - working directly with teachers and other school staff;
 - helping children from underprivileged backgrounds to adjust to a new learning environment and overcome linguistic, cultural and social barriers (communicating with children in their mother language);
 - helping to set up personalised programmes to develop Roma children’s skills;
 - organising learning activities for children, including children with special educational needs;
 - providing specific cultural input;
 - carrying out educational tasks assigned to them by teachers;
 - preparing learning materials;
 - supervising children during breaks;
 - attending teachers’ meetings;
 - using children’s natural openness to stimulate mutual understanding and appreciation of other cultures.
2. In connection with leisure activities:
 - working with teaching staff who run school clubs;
 - coordinating or supporting extra-curricular arts activities (singing, music, dance, visual arts, drama, etc.);
 - organising visits to historic and cultural monuments;
 - organising participation in social activities at regional level;
 - organising social activities for parents;
 - working with school staff on out-of-school educational activities and holiday activities;
 - promoting positive social interaction;
 - providing guidance and support for all these activities, and representing Roma culture.

3. Working with families:
- visiting families, particularly those living in underprivileged neighbourhoods, to assess parents' social environment and attitudes, and also children's health;
 - organising meetings and working with parents, to involve them more closely in the schooling process;
 - providing information for families and making them realise the importance of pre-school education;
 - promoting tolerance and the overcoming of prejudice, as well as contacts between Roma and non-Roma parents and children;
 - arranging special activities for Roma mothers.

Similar, although less structured lists of tasks can be found in the cases of the Teaching Assistants in Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Croatia and Poland.

A typical example of the last category of countries with job profiles focused on the school-community relation is the situation of Roma School Mediator in Romania. The initial tasks assigned to the mediator were:

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

These tasks have been later reformulated. More specifically, currently the mediator should:

- ❖ Make sure that the school staff is aware of the particular situation or problems that represent barriers for students in attending the courses regularly;
- ❖ Offer consultancy and orientation to families regarding various social and educational issues. The school mediator should be aware of the social and educational policies, implementing institutions and the facilities they provide;
- ❖ Mediate special situations, that can appear in educational or family environment with calm, patience and tolerance;
- ❖ Work in team with school director, school staff and community representatives and facilitate communication between them;
- ❖ Promote values such as cultural diversity, inclusion and equal chances, both in school environment and in the community, showing a personal commitment in this direction;
- ❖ Support the students and disadvantage families in overcoming the barriers that are preventing their development according with their potential.

Another difference concerns the place of the Roma culture in the work of the mediator/assistant. In some cases the promotion of Roma cultural identity in school and in extracurricular activities is seen explicitly as a key task, while in other cases this aspect is not mentioned at all or is even avoided.

Despite the differences in the job profiles of Roma mediators/assistants in various countries, there is a common core of activities that appear in most cases and that concern the mediation between school and Roma families.

Training

With very few exceptions, most countries do not have a systematic training procedure for the Roma mediators/assistants. In some cases, such as Spain, only a short initial training is provided and the training continues on the job, based on the cooperation with professional social workers. In other cases, such as Poland, Bulgaria, but also Finland, training seminars are being organised mainly in the framework of EU-funded projects.

The requirements for acceding to the position of mediator/assistant are either basic education or high-school graduation. In some countries, like Croatia, the assistants employed are required to continue their education while working and are provided support in this process.

From the point of view of the certification associated with the training programmes, there are two kinds of training provided to Roma mediators/assistants: professional training and initial training within a pedagogical institution.

A good example of training provision is offered by the Czech Republic, but a similar approach is used also in Slovakia:

The initial training programme for assistants is “Pedagogical minimum”. **Pedagogical minimum** is the course composed of theoretical (10 days intensive block of lectures – 80 hours) and practical parts. The lectures are focused on the role of the assistants in the school, pedagogy, psychology, social work, human right, conflict resolution, communication techniques, and leisure activities. The practical part consists of 40 hours in the school or other educational institution. The training was held in the past by the NGOs “Nova skola” and “Humanitas profess”, as well as by the Cabinet of multicultural education of Masaryk University in Brno and by some other local institutions. Another part of the training focuses on team cooperation. The TANDEM training programme is supporting team cooperation between assistant and teacher in the schools and contributes to the clarification of assistants` position. The training also improves the climate in the classroom. The training is designed for tandems working together in the class. Each tandem goes through a two 2-days seminar – focusing on communication and on pedagogical issues. Participants clarify the roles and competencies of the teacher and assistant and model the techniques and methods to be used in the classroom. The participants also learn methods for preparing and evaluation the lessons. The exchange of the experience between teachers and assistants during the courses is very useful.

In Romania, after several years when the training and supervision of mediators was done at a small scale by NGOs, educational authorities recently piloted with over 70 mediators from 10 counties an initial training programme delivered by a pedagogical college (a high-school level institution currently under reform after having been a long time an institution for the initial training of primary school teachers).

In this pilot phase the training programme was organised partly as residential training in training centres and partly as school-based training. In addition, the participants were required to spend a number of hours of individual learning. The training programme was therefore composed of:

1. Classroom Based Training (336 hours, 11 weeks)
2. On the Job Training (504 hours, 17 weeks)
3. Individual Learning (660 hours, 28 weeks)
4. Final evaluation and accreditation (30 hours, 1 week)

The total length of the programme was of 1500 hours, equivalent of 28 training weeks.

The classroom-based training is structured on two sections a core curriculum and a curriculum adapted to local needs. The structure of the core curriculum consists of:

1. Inter-professional work. School mediator's job description – (30 hours);
2. Inclusive education (30 hours);
3. Conflict resolution. Counselling (30 hours);
4. Community participation. Negotiation and community mediation (30 hours);
5. Language, literature and Romani culture (30 hours);
6. ICT – ECDL courses (66 hours);
7. Public speech, public presentation. Communication Skills. Listening skills (30 hours).

The curriculum adapted to local needs includes the following topics:

- Child protection issues;
- Learning difficulties;
- Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties;
- Training for Roma parents and Roma families;
- Develop social services and social support partnerships;
- Record keeping and database use.

The modules adapted to local needs have a length of 30 hours: 15 hours for practical projects in school, community or training centre and 15 hours for classroom based training. The school-based training includes activities such as:

- School and community activities;
- School and community need analysis;
- Intervention design at school and community level;
- Assessment, evaluation and optimization of the activities.

These activities are based upon an Individual Training Plan that makes the connection between on-the-job training and classroom-based training. The plan is design by school mediator in cooperation with the school director and a tutor. Monthly evaluations of the progress are run accordingly with the activities proposed in the Individual Training Plan and optimizations and corrections are proposed. The Individual Training Plan includes:

- Familiarisation with the application of educational policies in the school where the school mediator activates, familiarisation with school resources;
- Presentation meeting with school staff in which the school director presents either the role and responsibilities of the school mediators in school and community;
- Individual meetings calendar of the school mediators with the school's staff; Evaluation meeting calendar (once a month)
- The calendar of weekly meetings between mediator and school's staff (min. 2 hours);
- The schedule of meeting with NGOs, local authorities, community representatives, representatives of parents and pupils;

An interesting experience regarding the training of Roma mediators has been accumulated also in Finland. After a period (1994-1999) when training was delivered through short term seminars, a more systematic training was initiated in 2000 and accompanied by an "information folder" for mediators. The content of the folder was decided based on the needs expressed by practicing mediators and is divided into 12 sections, including information about legislation, European and international documents, rights and responsibilities of citizens, relations with law-enforcement structures, structure of public administration, discrimination

issues, the education system, social protection and healthcare system, substance abuse, Roma culture and history, communication and public presentation, reporting and conducting a meeting, and organisation of cultural and educational activities. This training approach was piloted and later expanded within a Socrates-Comenius project that was implemented between 2001 and 2004.

Other relevant experiences

Intercultural mediators

In several countries, including Belgium, Italy, Portugal and Spain, with significant immigrant population of extra-European origin, local authorities employ members of the immigrant communities to work as intercultural mediators for facilitating the access to public services of the immigrants and their communication with public authorities and with the local population. Many such intercultural mediators work closely with schools and we consider this experience as being very inspiring for the initiatives concerning the employment of Roma mediators.

In Italy, for example, an intercultural mediator:

- belongs to one of the non-Italian cultures represented in Italian territory and therefore is knowledgeable of its respective language and specific cultural elements;
- has personally undergone the experience of migration;
- is well inserted in the Italian reality, knowing the language, the administrative structures and cultural codes;
- has followed a specific training pathway.

The work of the intercultural mediator in school consists in:

- support for the integration in school of immigrant children
 - o acquiring information about the family situation
 - o mapping the individual educational pathway of newly arrived immigrant children
 - o contributing in assessing existing competencies
 - o introduction of the norms of the school to newly arrived immigrant children
 - o accompanying the children in their first experiences in the school
 - o providing translation and interpretation
- facilitating the relations with the families
 - o presentation of the school and of its organisation
 - o information about school life, including translation of specific messages
 - o facilitating meetings of parents with school staff
 - o prevention of conflicts and misunderstandings
- promoting intercultural education
 - o promotion of the language and culture of immigrant community
 - o organisation of intercultural encounters and animating them
 - o cooperation with teachers in organising intercultural education activities

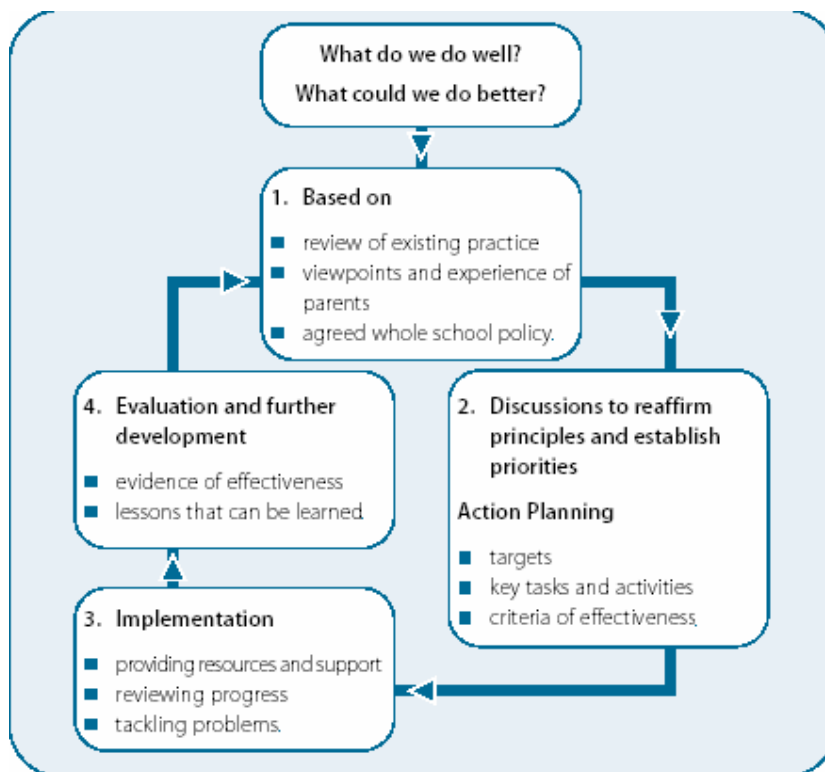
The employment of intercultural mediators is done in Italy either directly by local public authorities or through a partnership with NGOs supported by local authorities. Their training has been initially provided by NGOs through training seminars but in most cases these NGOs later established partnerships with Vocational Training Centres thus providing mediators with a certified and recognised training. Currently, in addition to this, there is also the option of recognition of acquired competencies which is facilitating considerably the certification of intercultural mediators. Moreover, the work of intercultural mediators is supported by the provision of support materials and guidelines to be used in their daily activities.

Developing home-school links

Interesting materials have been suggested by the representative of UK when submitting the questionnaire concerning the training of Teaching Assistants and Learning Support Assistants, which are not specific for Roma but that can concern Roma where local educational authorities identify a need in this respect. But these materials also included highly relevant information concerning the development of home-school links and involving parents in a more active way in the education of their children in cooperation with the school.

They recommend a participatory process, illustrated by the following diagram that includes an assessment, a planning process, its implementation and an evaluation phase, involving together teachers and parents.

We agree that, although designed for an improvement of home-school relations in general, this approach can be very useful for dealing with the issues of education of Roma children. Of course, in the case of Roma communities, several specific issues need to be taken into account but the employment of a Roma mediator could play a very important role in making such a process effective.



Sensitive issues

The analysis also revealed a few sensitive issues that need to be addressed in relation to the position of Roma mediator/assistant. We will focus here on two such issues:

1. the legitimacy of a public policy targeting members of a specific ethnic group and involving the employment of members of this specific ethnic group (this issue was explicitly raised by Germany's team asked to fill-in the questionnaire but appears to be highly relevant in the case of Austria and France as well);
2. the negative effects of the employment of Roma assistants, including risk of segregation and of emphasising an inferior position of the Roma (this issue was particularly raised in Bulgaria but it was also present in several studies and articles about the employment of Teaching Assistants in Czech Republic and Slovakia).

1. Germany's reply informs that, "a session of the officers of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) responsible for migration issues stated that the questionnaire of the Council of Europe contains questions which in pursuance of the Measures on the Protection of Minorities promulgated by the Council of Europe cannot be

answered as they refer to information, which may not be collected. The participants stipulated to take up this questionnaire when the Council of Europe transmits a revised version of the questionnaires, which is in accordance with the Charter for Minorities.” We assume that German representatives question the idea of the ethnic identification both of the mediator/assistant and of the target group they are supposed to work for.

However, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities states indeed that “the persons belonging to a national minority have the right to choose to be treated or not to be treated as such” but also that the “measures adopted to take due account of the specific conditions of the persons belonging to national minorities [...] shall not be considered an act of discrimination”. It is particularly this approach that is reflected in the Recommendation (2000)⁴ of the Committee of Ministers, stating that “the education of Roma/Gypsy children should be a priority in national policies in favour of Roma/Gypsies” and that “particular attention should also be paid to the need to ensure better communication with parents, where necessary using mediators from the Roma/Gypsy community, which could then lead to specific career possibilities”. This is also reflected by the practice or current plans of a majority of the European countries where Roma live, as shown above.

But this represents without doubt a sensitive issue that needs to be taken into account in order to prevent unintended negative effects. The Austrian answer also states explicitly that there should be no certification of the ethnic background of the RomaassistenInnen. In UK, learning support assistants are employed without any specific reference to Roma and Travelers while in France the support measures are meant for “Gens du Voyage” taking into account their specific way of life and not their ethnic background. In some countries, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Bulgaria, there was a transition from “Roma Teaching Assistants”, employed in pilot projects by NGOs, towards “Teaching Assistants” or “Assistants of Teacher”, without any explicit mention of their ethnic background although knowledge of Romani language and of the Roma culture was maintained as a requirement. The scope of their work, in the Czech Republic, for instance, has also been reformulated from explicitly mentioning the work in Roma communities to work “in preparatory classes for children with a social disadvantage”. However, in other cases an explicit mention of the ethnic/cultural Roma background is maintained. Such is the case of countries that have elaborated under EU recommendations, and as part of the EU accession process, national strategies for improving the situation of Roma, with a strong educational component, like Romania or Poland. The explicit mention of the Roma background is also present in Finland, Spain or Italy in relation to the Roma mediators. However, even in these cases the decision of employment is based on criteria like the knowledge of the Romani language and culture as is sometimes made in consultation with Roma organizations or community groups.

2. Although Bulgaria seems to be now the country with the highest number of Roma assistants, even higher than Slovakia, where Roma assistants are used for more than ten years, it is in Bulgaria that most Roma representatives expressed a clear opposition to this measure claiming that it would reinforce the segregation of Roma children and their inferior status with regards to the majority children². They also claim that one of the main functions assigned to Roma Teaching Assistants, to facilitate the communication between teacher and Roma children, is useless since Roma children are in their great majority perfectly bilingual and have a good command of Bulgarian language. But the main opposition concerns the fact that the assistant is always in an inferior position compared to the teacher and also the emphasis on the deficiencies of Roma children.

² This has been reported by several sources, including Open Society Institute’s Roma Education Initiative, Save the Children report “Denied a Future?” and contacts with Roma organizations.

This risk of negative consequences of the employment of Roma Teaching Assistants has also been reported in the cases where they are well established as part of the education system and with functioning for a longer time. For instance, in the case of Slovakia, as reported by Tankersly, Konkova and Repiski³ “in many classrooms teaching assistants are seen serving students snacks, cleaning up after teachers or students, or watching the students on the playground while the teacher takes a break”. Of course, this is far from providing Roma children with a positive role model and, instead of having the initially expected positive consequences, turns the employment of Roma Teaching Assistants into “a vehicle for keeping marginalized students in subservient positions in their societies”. A similar tendency has been also reported in Romania with regards to the “health mediators”, Roma persons employed by the healthcare system to facilitate access of Roma to healthcare.

It is obvious that these risks should not be overlooked and mainly two solutions have been envisaged by experts and policy makers to counter them. The one suggested by the Slovak team quoted above recommends insisting more on the role of co-teacher that the assistant may have, thus situating him/her on a position closer to the one of the teacher. However, this can only be achieved when the assistants have a good level of pedagogical training and when teachers are well trained as well for working with an assistant, like it is indeed the case in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. An alternative solution is the one proposed by the Romanian educational authorities, but also in countries like Italy or Spain, where the term used is the one of “mediator” and the tasks related to the classroom activities are very limited while priority is given to the connection between teachers and parents, school and community, thus situating the mediator, but also the Roma parents on an equal level position with the teachers. In Romania, it should be noted that the function of role model for Roma children is often taken by the teacher of Romani language that has (at least in theory) an equal status with the other teachers.

Conclusions

An important conclusion we can draw from the analysis of the current situation regarding the employment of Roma mediators and assistants is that we are dealing with a very dynamic situation characterised mainly by two processes:

1. most of the countries that have initiated the use of Roma mediators/assistants before 2000, mainly as pilot initiatives, are now expanding the employment of mediators/assistants and trying to find a more stable institutional framework, together with a more coherent and officially certified training provision
2. more and more countries initiate programmes for the introduction of Roma mediators/assistants and they usually do so through the involvement of public authorities and particularly of educational authorities. This may result in a quicker progress towards a more stable institutionalised framework and training system than in the case of the countries in the previous category.

A slight predominance of the use of “assistants”, more than of “mediators” in the terminology can also be observed. Also, most of the countries currently elaborating strategies and projects on this topic tend to use “assistant”.

The process represented by the sending of questionnaires to the member countries for gathering data about the Roma mediators/assistants has had by itself a number of positive consequences that are worth mentioning here. Thus, the request to answer the questionnaire:

³ Tankersly, D., Konkova, E. and Repiski, D. Transforming the Role of Teaching Assistants, in *Educating Children for Democracy. Classroom Practices*. No 3, 2002

- raised the awareness of educational authorities on the provisions of the Recommendation (2000)4 on the Education of Roma Children and on the activities of the Council of Europe in this field
- determined educational authorities to establish contacts with relevant specialised departments but also with NGOs and contributed to the recognition of their expertise and experience in this field
- allowed the expression of different understandings among various countries of the relationships between the Recommendation (2000)4 and other Council of Europe documents regarding the protection of national minorities and emphasised the need for further exchanges on this topic.

The results also show the need for further progress in the training provision for Roma mediators/assistants and the high opportunity at this moment of elaborating a European guide of Roma mediator and the opportunities that are offered by the experiences regarding the use of intercultural mediators with different cultural communities across Europe.

The differences in approach outlined above bring additional proof to the pertinence of another important provision of the Recommendation (2000)4: “member states should further encourage and support the exchange of experience and good practice”. European level exchange and comparative analysis could indeed contribute in a significant measure to an effective use of the lessons learned in various countries on this topic.

Appendix

the letter and the questionnaire

Secretariat general
DIRECTORATE GENERAL IV
DIRECTORATE OF SCHOOL, OUT-OF-
SCHOOL AND HIGHER EDUCATION

PLEASE QUOTE: CR/AA



Strasbourg, xxx

Dear Sir, Dear Madam

As part of the “education of Roma/Gypsy children in Europe” project, the Council of Europe is giving special attention to **the question of mediators and Roma/Gypsy teaching assistants.**

This is in keeping with Recommendation No. R(2000)4 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states on the education of Roma/Gypsy children in Europe, the basic reference for this project, which suggests “where necessary using mediators from the Roma/Gypsy community which could then lead to specific career possibilities” to improve communication between teachers and parents, and between schools and the Roma community.

In April 2004, the Council of Europe held a seminar in Romania, which was attended by the representatives of twenty countries. This seminar provided the opportunity to take stock of the current situation of the employment of Roma/Gypsy mediators and teaching assistants. The main conclusions are set out in document DGIV/EDU/ROM (2004)11.

One of the main aims of the “education of Roma/Gypsy children in Europe” project is to facilitate the exchange of information on innovatory practices at European level with a view to preparing a European handbook for Roma/Gypsy school mediators.

The following questionnaire is the initial tool for preparing this handbook and its purpose is to collect information from all the countries concerned. It is structured in such a way as to take account of both the diversity of situations in the different member states and the diversity of approaches that might be taken, focusing on Roma school mediators and other categories with similar functions.

It is aimed above all at the departments of ministries of education responsible for such matters but also at non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local or regional authorities and at other bodies that have already carried out this type of work.

I would be very grateful if you could return the questionnaire to the Secretariat with all the information that might be useful in preparing the handbook for the training of Roma/Gypsy school mediators before 31 May 2005.

If you require any further information, please contact Ms Aurora Ailincăi, the responsible of the project at the following number: +33 3 90 21 53 31 Fax +33 3 88 41 27 06 E-mail aurora.ailincai@coe.int.

Thank you for your assistance.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Carole REICH
Head of the Division for the European Dimension of Education

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Does the education system in your country/institution /organisation employ people **from the Roma/Gypsy community** to facilitate communication between teachers and Roma/Gypsy families and/or to improve access to schools and increase Roma/Gypsy children's chances of success at school?

YES

NO

If the answer is NO, please move on to question No. 15.

2. What words or expressions are used to designate them, for example: mediator, assistant, facilitator, etc. (in your national language(s) and in English/French) :

3. What legal framework, if any, defines their employment? (for example, law on education, teaching staff regulations, ministerial decision, decision issued by a local or regional authority, etc.)

4. What are their tasks/functions and responsibilities?

5. Is there an official document setting out their tasks and responsibilities ?

YES

NO

If YES, please enclose a copy of this document, translated into English or French if possible.

6. Who, in your country, launched the idea of employing members of the Roma community to improve school attendance and/or Roma/Gypsy children's chances of success at school?

a Roma NGO

a non-Roma NGO

a school

a local/regional authority

the education authorities

don't know

other.....

Name of the organisation/institution which launched this initiative and source of funding

Please state, if possible, the year and place of the first initiatives of this type.

7. If you employ this type of staff, please describe the current situation:
- Employer(s) _____
 - Occupational category _____
 - Type of employment contract _____
 - Special requirements or conditions to be met by candidates

 - Number of persons employed _____
 - Trends (number rising, dropping, stable) _____

8. Who decides what the social conditions of the local Roma community must be to justify the employment of such a person? Please give details of any indicators and minimum standards.

9. Who certifies that the person employed belongs to the Roma community and how do they do this?

10. What are the recruitment procedures ?

11. Describe any existing initial training programmes

Type of training

- seminars held as part of a pilot project
 pre-university training

- university training
- vocational training

Institution(s)

Length and structure

Syllabus

Profile of trainers

Assessment

Qualifications

12. Are there any in-service training programmes for such persons?

YES

NO

If YES, please give details

13. Which authorities supervise their work?

14. Are there any documents to guide them in their work and help them draft reports (handbooks, files, forms etc.) ?

YES

NO

If YES, please give details (enclose documents if possible)

-
15. Do you know of any programmes (in your country or in other Council of Europe member states) launched by NGOs, local or regional authorities, etc. which employ Roma/Gypsies to facilitate communication between teachers and Roma/Gypsy families and/or to improve access to schools and improve Roma/Gypsy children's chances of success at school ?

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16. Are any persons employed in your country/institution/organisation, without reference to their ethnic or cultural origin, to facilitate communication between teachers and Roma/Gypsy families and/or to improve access to schools and improve Roma/Gypsy children's chances of success at school? (for example, people working in specialised departments of the education authorities or social workers doing this sort of work)

-
17. Are any persons employed in your country/institution/organisation to facilitate communication between teachers and families and to increase the chances of success at school of children from cultural communities other than the Roma/Gypsy?
-