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Building culture in the classroom: the role of Romany assistants in the Romany classroom

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There is an urgent need in the Slovak Republic for systematic analysis of changes in Roma communities. Attempts to resolve the cultural compatibility of the Roma minority (which now represents 6.5% of the Slovak population (Zelina, 2001)) with that of the non-Roma majority has taken various forms in the course of history. After 1945, the procedures of the state administration of Czechoslovakia has had three phases:

- from 1958, the social assimilation of the Roma, following the central institutionalisation of the state (i.e. the “Gypsy question”);
- from 1965, 'correcting' the dispersal of the Roma - the planned and organised diffusion of Roma from highly concentrated areas in Slovakia, generally to Czech lands; and
- from 1972, the integration of the Roma into mainstream society (Koptová, Schmidt, 2001).

A principal change in the state's approach to the Roma occurred in April 1991, when the Slovak government adopted Decree *151/1991: The Policy of Government Politics toward the Roma*, which officially declared Roma as a nationality, adopted the title Romovia, and guaranteed the multilateral cultural and ethnic development of the Roma. This meant that Roma could freely declare their ethnicity for the first time. Sociological surveys carried throughout the Roma communities the estimate number of Roma population at present is 500,000. However, in 1991 only 70,000 Roma were willing to declare themselves as Roma, and by 2001 this had only risen to 90,000 did so.

Slovakia receives considerable grants dedicated to improving the position of the Roma communities. However, the combined effort of the government, foundations, NGOs, Romany leaders, universities and individuals has not yet proved successful. Educational researchers have suggested that some of the factors contributing to a solution would include

- demonstrating the value of education;
- enhancing motivation to learn;
- offering optional pre-school education;
- achieving mastery of the Slovak language;
- developing parents' level of education;
- enriching cultural, social, and emotional backgrounds; and
- adaptations towards the dominant society.

Since the end of the Second World War, provision of adequate education for Romany children and their achievement has been the subject of debate in Slovakia, and a focus for educational and psychological research. Despite sustained efforts both during Communism and after 1989, Romany students have continued with high failure rates in education. The contemporary elementary or 'special' school is perceived as a "foreign institution" by Romany children: they do not want to attend these schools because of the lack of respect for their ethnic, cultural, social, and psychological differences. However,

there have been enormous efforts to improve education for Romany children in recent times, largely because

1. there is an increase in the number of the Romany children. The Roma population is increasing (3.8% growth in the last ten years), while the non-Roma population shows decreasing trends (zero or minus index). Children below 14 years of age represent 50% of the Romany population, and projections suggest that by 2060 the Roma will constitute half of the total population (Zelina, 2001),
2. sociologists, psychologists, and pedagogues all agree that a good-quality modern education is the only way of improving the position of the Roma people.

Roma children have specific cognitive, affective and sensual-motoric characteristics, and these should be reflected in the process of education.

What determines these special characteristics?

1. Pre-natal development is influenced by two groups of factors:
 - endogenous: inadequate care during pregnancy, frequent childbearing, giving birth too young or at a pre-climacteric age, poor dietary habits, smoking, alcoholism, drug abuse.
 - exogenous: ethnic origin of Roma people (Bernasovský, Bernasovská, 2001).
2. Specific features of the socialisation of Roma children in the areas of:
 - deferred development of language skills,
 - low awareness of wider society by the non-Roma community, due to their seclusion and isolation from the majority,
 - the overall risk factor and social setting,
 - the Roma family not meeting the norms of the majority community,
 - under-valuing the role of education,
 - different dietary habits,
 - increased migration of families,
 - high unemployment and disability rates of family breadwinners (Gáborová 2001).

Such adverse factors have a variety of impacts. In schools these are often reflected in a failure in school tasks, an increased susceptibility to illness and both physical and mental disorders, and high absence rates (Kundráťová, 1995).

These conditions lead later to a lack of qualifications amongst Roma, an almost 100% unemployment rate, a socially excluded way of life and increased crime rate. The cultural and social level of Romany people thus creates a vicious circle. Society as a whole is aware that overcoming these factors and reducing their negative impact is only achievable through early and adequate education. A high quality of institutionalised pre-school preparation for Romany children is therefore an important first step towards their overall education. Kindergarten attendance by Romany children in Slovakia in 2001 was approximately 5% (Ondrášová, 2002) but in some regions was 0% (Podhájecká). Earlier in the 1980s (under the socialist regime), the kindergarten attendance of Romany children was subsidised by the state, and Romany children were prioritised over the majority population for free kindergarten places.

Romany children represent 72% of the pupils who failed in Slovakia in the school year 2000/2001 (Ondrášová, 2002). Compared to the overall school population they fail fourteen times more often; receive lower conduct marks five times more often; and leave school earlier than the end of the compulsory attendance years thirty-six times more often (Fliegel, 1992). Furthermore, a high percentage of Romany pupils have an inadequate command of the Slovak language when they begin school: special language programs are being developed to increase the verbal competence of Romany pupils. A large proportion of Roma pupils also end their compulsory education in the primary or upper junior grades, which has led to suggestions from educators and psychologists regarding the possibilities of accelerating school performance.

How can we improve the education of Romany children?

The following projects have been explored in Slovakia:

1. the opening of zero or preparatory grades in primary schools
2. the establishment of educational and recreational summer camps for Romany children
3. whole-day educational programmes
4. remedial classes (special classes)
5. the payment of supplementary wages for the teachers of Romany pupils
6. the employment of Romany classroom assistants.

Staff from our department at Presov University participated in a year-long study during which differences in the somatic, mental, social, language and cultural development of the Romany children were observed, tested and evaluated. One of the research objectives was to observe:

- attempts to accelerate successful school performance of Roma pupils,
- changes in social relationships between the Roma and non-Roma classes,
- particularities of social preference in the Roma classes,
- enhancing reading and writing skills, etc.

One of the independent variables in the study was the presence of a Romany assistant to the teacher. Their role in the class was to act as

- an auxiliary to the teacher,
- a communication mediator,
- a broker of cooperation between the teacher and pupils.

The Romany assistant is thus an integral team member, who is in direct contact with the students and their parents. Assistants are members of the Romany community, and this allows students and parents to better relate to them. It is essential for the Romany community to change its attitude towards education in order to give Romany children greater career opportunities, and the Romany assistants can act as a role model, demonstrating a professional status achieved through their own efforts.

A classroom with a teacher and Romany assistant serve as a micro-model of the encounter of two cultures, with all indices typical of such contact. Many classes employing Romany assistants have been established in Slovakia, and the sample studied included five experimental and five control classes. The task of employing a suitable Romany Assistant position was not easy, as one of the prerequisites was that the applicant

had completed a secondary education: the generally low educational level of the Romany people restricted possible selection. Some demonstrated a low work ethic, financial claims, absenteeism and a reluctance to cooperate. The researchers, in cooperation with the *Škola dokorán (School wide open)* foundation, have suggested further training for Romany Assistants, which would enhance their pedagogical and psychological competencies: many assistants were offered an opportunity to study at some of the pedagogical faculties in Slovak universities.

The research team analysed changes in the cognitive level of pupils in the experimental group after intervention: the analysis revealed a multilateral positive impact on the educational process resulting from the presence of the assistant, as a bearer of Romany culture and as a mediator between school and parents. These results, together with a description of the methodology and the intervention, has been variously published (Beisetzer, 2001, Belasova, 2001, Burgerova, 2001, Kovalcikova, 2001, Portík, 2001).

Here we present partial results from a survey we conducted as part of our research project. The objective was to discern the views and attitudes of both classroom teachers and their Romany assistants towards:

1. working conditions in the classroom;
2. improving the quality of Romany children's education;
3. the methods employed to foster mutual co-operation between teacher and assistant; and
4. motivation for the Romany assistant's participation.

The survey sample consisted of twenty-four respondents (twelve teachers and twelve Romany assistants), who participated in a workshop called Anti-Bias Education, held on 12 January, 2001 in Presov. All the teachers and Romany assistants surveyed were involved in the *Head Start Project*. The survey used an anonymous questionnaire with seventeen questions for the teachers and fifteen for the Romany assistants.

Questions and responses regarding the improvement of the quality of Romany children's education were:

What would you recommend to improve the quality of education of Romany children?

Teachers' answers:

- obligatory pre-school preparation
- adapt Slovak language and math text books
- equip classes with teaching aids and audio-visual technology
- encourage participation in after-school clubs
- invite parents to visit classrooms
- involve parents in the classroom.

Romany Assistants' answers:

- obligatory parent involvement in the classroom
- train more Romany teachers
- create after-school activities
- provide visual equipment and materials
- create before and after school programmes for students, including free lunch.

What would you recommend to improve your working environment?

Teachers' answers:

- more teaching aids
- display work of Romany craftsmen in the classroom
- equip the class with suitable furniture
- create a 'personal hygiene centre'

Romany Assistants' answers:

- more teaching aids
- keep an animal in the class (a canary, fish, etc. which students can care for)
- provide a television, a video player, and a cassette player
- display children's and teachers' photographs in a prominent location in the class or in the corridor
- allow pupils to bring favourite items from home (toys, etc.)
- create a *domaci kutik* (a home centre) in the class (including a small table, armchairs, and a candle)
- create a kitchenette in the class, so that the students learn how to cook.

In what area, do you think, you need to improve, so that your work with students is at a higher level?

What workshops and training would you recommend?

Teachers' answers:

- exchange ideas with other teachers who teach Romany students (e.g. visits to other schools, observation of lessons, etc.)
- acquire basics of Romany culture and language
- learn more about the use of choice-time activities
- learn about relaxation techniques
- meet Romany personalities (writers, musicians, etc.)
- learn the methodology for teaching and assessment
- acquire a deeper knowledge of classroom's verbal and non-verbal communication
- participate in workshops on multicultural and anti-bias education

Romany assistants' answers:

- acquire knowledge about special pedagogy
- participate in workshops dealing with co-operation between school and family
- attend workshops exclusively for Romany assistants
- perfect one's own Romany language
- acquire basic teaching strategies
- participation in career ladder for Romany assistants

The answers to the question *What would you recommend to improve your work environment?* suggest that respondents are not indifferent to this issue, and it is interesting that the teachers' and Romany assistants' views on the questions are often the same. However, the views of the two groups differ in the question of the possibility of improving the class environment. Romany assistants, knowing the living environment of Romany students, offered interesting proposals (creating a 'home centre', a small kitchenette, caring for a small animal, etc.).

We also asked teachers and Romany assistants about their views and attitudes towards mutual co-operation and the possibilities of its improvement:

Characterise your co-operation with the Romany assistant

Teachers' answers:

Very good:	17 %
Good:	58 %
Satisfactory:	17 %
Unsatisfactory:	8 %
Almost none:	0 %

Characterise your co-operation with the teacher

Romany assistants' answers:

Very good:	58 %
Good:	42 %
Satisfactory:	0 %
Unsatisfactory:	0 %
Almost none:	0 %

From the answers it is apparent that Romany assistants are more satisfied with their mutual co-operation than teachers, and it is promising that nobody stated that there is little or no co-operation.

In which activity has the presence of the Romany assistant proved itself most beneficial?

Teachers' answers:

- in co-operation with parents (visits of families, overcoming of problems in mutual communication, school attendance, etc.)
- in the adaptation of the Romany students to the school environment
- as a class helper (handing out supplies, creating physical class environment, etc.)
- in overcoming language challenges
- in teaching procedures (e.g. during walks outside).

Most teachers (85%) thought that the presence of the Romany assistant was instrumental in improving communication and obtaining co-operation with families: this is fundamental when considering the future role of the Romany assistant in the classroom.

Conclusion

One of the ways to improve the interest of Romany children in education is to involve members of their own ethnic group in the education process. Since generally the education level of the Roma is low, there is not a large pool of Romany teachers with university education who could work with Romany students, so a solution may be the use of Romany assistants in the classroom.

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