



This paper is taken from

*Creating Communities: Local, National and Global  
Selected papers from the fourteenth Conference of the  
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe  
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2012

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,  
ISBN 978-1-907675-19-5**

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Kaouri, C. & Dimakos, I. (2012) 'Psychosocial support and counselling for Roma families in Western Greece',  
in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Creating Communities: Local, National and Global*. London: CiCe, pp.  
104 - 114.

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

## **Psychosocial support and counselling for Roma families in Western Greece**

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### **Abstract**

*The status quo of Roma communities in Europe is strongly marked by marginalization and discrimination. Roma people tend to face social exclusion and segregation leading to lack of education, chronic unemployment, and limited access to healthcare, housing and public services as well as widespread poverty. Within the framework of lifelong learning education, attempts have been initiated in order to empower Roma families to develop citizenship identity and actively pursue their rights as members of the Greek society. The Department of Primary Education of the University of Patras collaborated with The Institute of Continuing Education for Adults in order to develop educational programmes such as 'Psychosocial support and counselling for Roma families' that promoted social integration of Roma families. During the last four months of 2011, a particular action was initiated and focused on adult Roma education. Under the auspices of the action, eight Parents' Schools (with 15-18 Roma parents participating at each school) were established in specific locations with large numbers of Roma families in Western Greece. Schools were led by professional psychologists and trained social workers. According to their evaluations, the action enhanced Roma parents' skills to overcome difficulties and tried to alter rooted stereotypes with respect to employment, education, and access to public services. The specific action aspired to the building of communication bridges, referring to the co-operation between Roma families, schools and local communities. The main goal of this intervention is the maturation of attitudes of openness, acceptance, solidarity and respect, the development of pro-social skills, a sensitisation about school attendance and the encouragement of parent-teacher communication. The ultimate goal is to raise awareness that Roma families should be treated like any other EU citizens with equal access to all fundamental rights and active participation in the socio-economic context of our society.*

**Keywords:** *Roma, parents' schools, stereotypes, social integration, psychosocial support*

### **Introduction**

Many of the estimated 10-12 million Roma in Europe tend to face prejudice, discrimination, social exclusion and segregation in their daily lives, leading to lack of education, chronic unemployment, limited access to healthcare, housing and public services as well as widespread poverty. They are marginalised and live in very poor socio-economic conditions. Their situation is not acceptable in the European Union (EU) at the beginning of the 21st century (European Commission, 2010a). Determined action, such as active dialogue with the Roma, is needed both at national and regional level. While primary responsibility for that action rests with public authorities, it remains a challenge given that the social and economic integration of Roma people is a two-way

process which requires a change of mind for the majority of the citizens as well as of members of the Roma communities (European Commission, 2010b).

First of all, member states need to ensure that Roma are not discriminated against but treated like any other EU citizens with equal access to all fundamental rights. In addition, action is needed to break the vicious cycle of poverty passing from one generation to the next. In many member states, Roma represent a significant and growing proportion of the school age population and therefore the future workforce. The Roma population is young: 35.7% are under 15 compared to 15.7% of the EU population overall. The average age is 25 years among Roma, compared to 40 years across the EU member states (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2009).

The vast majority of working-age Roma lack the education needed to find good jobs. It is therefore of crucial importance to invest in the education of Roma children to allow them later on to successfully entering the labour market. Member states are already under an obligation to give Roma (like other EU citizens) non-discriminatory access to education, employment, vocational training, healthcare, social protection and housing through Directive 2000/43/EC.

According to the UNESCO, education should be a means to empower children and adults to become active participants in the transformation of their societies. 'The fact that so many Roma are unemployed is due partly to the social situation and discrimination but to an important extent it is due to a lack of education' (EUMC, 2006, p.14). Learning should therefore also focus on values, attitudes and behaviours, which enable individuals to learn to live together in a world characterised by diversity and pluralism. In this respect non-discrimination and respect for others should be essential elements of teaching and classroom interaction in the multi-cultural European societies in order to improve access to education and equality of educational opportunities that will strengthen social cohesion.

### ***Roma Literacy Rates in Greece***

In Greece, Roma literacy rates were found to be extremely poor with approximately 60 – 80% of nomadic Roma illiterate and the remaining 20 - 40% functionally illiterate; practically no Roma children had received pre-school education, while a significant number of Roma children could not enrol at all, due to the lack of necessary documentation and lack of proof of vaccination (Tsiokos, Vergidis & Nikolakopoulos, 1998).

According to the EUMC (2006), existing data concerning Roma enrolment in Greece in the past years have not been reliable: Roma pupils are not recorded systematically in school registers, while some schools have reported that Roma enrol simply in order to collect an annual education benefit, but do not actually attend classes.

A 1998-1999 survey (Papakonstantinou, Vasileiadou, & Pavli-Korre, 2004) showed that 69.7% of the sample aged 18-47 years old had never attended school, while only 10% completed primary education, 2.1% compulsory education and 0.9% higher secondary

education; 42.6% of parents stated that their children attend school, but none in secondary education. Among the reasons given for not attending school 29.7% suggested the racist behaviour of teachers, pupils and their parents. Nevertheless, 85% believe that a better education would lead to better employment.

### ***Access to Education***

Roma youngsters should be strongly encouraged to finish primary school and participate also in secondary education. There is a need to strengthen links with communities through school mediators, or counselling services in order to promote active participation of the parents of Roma at school activities and interventions. Mediators can inform and advise parents on the workings of the local education system, and help to ensure that children make the transition between each stage of their school career. It is well known that children that enter late into the school system, or leave too early will subsequently experience significant difficulties, ranging from illiteracy and language problems to feelings of exclusion and inadequacy. As a result, they will have a harder time getting into further education, university or finding a good job. Therefore, initiatives of second chance programmes for drop-out young adults are encouraged, including programmes with an explicit focus on Roma children and Roma families (European Commission, 2011).

### ***IDEKE***

The General Secretariat of Life-Long Learning (GGDBM), under the *Ministry of National Education, Life-Long Learning and Religious Affairs*, is the executive, public body responsible for life-long education and training in Greece. Its mission is to design, coordinate and support measures which relate to supplementation of basic education and training both for the adult workforce of Greece and for groups threatened with social exclusion. Its main fields of action relate to basic education supplementation programmes and illiteracy programmes, continuing training courses, measures to combat exclusion from the labour market and Community Initiatives financed by the European Union (European Social Fund), social - cultural education courses, continuing training and repeat education measures for the adult workforce.

The Institute of Continuing Education for Adults (IDEKE) is supervised by the GGDBM. It is responsible for the implementation of programs and projects in adult learning at local, regional, national and transnational levels. Its main activities are adult learning within policies that include: literacy - basic education and skills, adult teaching and learning, the training of adult educators, second chance education, parents' counselling, intercultural education, tackling social exclusion/ active citizenship. IDEKE was able to gain expertise and experiences in different European projects dealing with literacy and language learning for women, socially disadvantaged groups, immigrants, ethnic and other minorities, as well as the training of the adult educators working with the respective target groups. IDEKE is responsible for the operation of the following formal education/training structures: (1) The Second Chance Schools (SCSs), (2) Adult Education Centres (KEEs) and (3) Parents' Schools.

The basic premise of the life long learning sector is that all citizens in Greece should have open and free of cost access to educational opportunities and pathways. More specifically, every citizen of 17 years and above has the opportunity, regardless of his/her socio-economic situation, level of education, country of origin, religion and place of residence, to develop his/her personality, to acquire modern knowledge and skills and to actively participate in the socio-economic context. Overall, in Greece 51,554 individuals were trained between 2004 and 2008 compared to 2,033 individuals between 2000 and 2004, representing a percentage increase of 2436 per cent. In addition, up to 2004 several initiatives for specific social groups, such as repatriates, gypsy, Roma and traveller people, immigrants and offenders, were implemented. Between 2004 and 2008, 2,159 repatriates, 4,259 Roma people, 7,103 Muslims, 12,539 offenders, 23,621 immigrants and 1,876 people with special educational needs were trained.

When developing national Roma integration strategies, IDEKE in collaboration with Universities across the country had in mind the following approaches:

1. Set achievable national goals for Roma integration to bridge the gap with the general population. These targets should address, as a minimum, the four EU Roma integration goals relating to access to education, employment, healthcare and housing.
2. Identify those segregated neighbourhoods, where communities are most deprived, using already available socio-economic and territorial indicators (i.e. very low educational level, long term unemployment).
3. Include strong monitoring methods to evaluate the impact of Roma integration actions and a review mechanism for the adaptation of the strategy.

### ***The Parents' Schools***

Parent's Schools aim to provide advisory support and counselling to parents in order for them to assume successful parenting. The program takes into account the complexities and difficulties of parenting in the modern socio-economic conditions. For the year 2011-2012 there have been planned 7 education programmes:

1. The family in modern times, duration of 50 hours,
2. Gender relationships, duration of 25 hours,
3. Development in older age, duration of 25 hours,
4. Collaboration between teachers and parents, duration of 25 hours,
5. Psychological counselling and support to socially excluded groups, duration of 25 hours,
6. Counselling to parents with special needs children, duration of 50 hours and
7. Stereotypes and discrimination in families, duration of 25 hours.

Fifty four (54) Parent's Schools currently operate in Greece (14 had been founded before March 2004 and 40 after March 2004). Parent's Schools do not operate in dedicated structures. They usually use classrooms in primary and secondary education public

schools or other places offered by local and regional education authorities, Municipalities or Prefectures.

According to the data provided by the General Secretariat of IDEKE, during the period 2003-2008, participation of adults in Parents' Schools was greatly expanded. More specifically in the regions of Achaia and Ilia, 800 parents participated in 72 classes operating during the period between 2011 and 2012 (Country Report on the Action Plan on Adult Learning: Greece, 2011).

### ***Good practice in working with parents***

Adopting an educational model, as opposed to a therapeutic or medical model, signals powerfully that parents are respected for the skills and experience they bring to parenting and that families have the potential to learn and develop. Furthermore, family learning, where parents and children are jointly involved in learning, strengthens family relationships, friendship networks, enhances community participation and develops trust between parents and school communities.

Working with parents involves respect for parents as adults, bringing a wealth of life experience to the learning experience. Parents' needs and interests are the starting point for developing the curriculum and they should be involved in shaping it. Those who work with parents are facilitators of change rather than teachers or counsellors. In practice, educators report that a wider curriculum is essential in gaining the trust of parents so that their need for specialised help such as basic skills can be identified. Every learner has a unique learning history and family context that requires individual attention. A learner centred approach like this cannot be rushed and standardised; regaining the confidence and trust of parents as learners requires time and sensitive facilitation by skilful professionals. Enhanced confidence was the major achievement reported by learners, but others include qualifications, better understanding of the education system, the ability to support their children's learning, and motivation to progress to further job-related training.

### ***Second Chance Schools***

The Ministry of Education has assigned IDEKE to establish 58 Second Chance Schools around Greece in order to offer marginalised young and older adults, opportunities to enter the labour market. Second Chance Schools work with people above 18 years old, who have not completed the nine-year compulsory education, and are therefore at risk of social exclusion. The curriculum is flexible so it responds to young people's individual needs. Emphasis is given to the acquisition of basic qualifications and the development of personal and prosocial skills. (Country Report on the Action Plan on Adult Learning: Greece, 2011).

### ***University of Patras***

Within the framework of lifelong learning education, attempts have been initiated in order to empower Roma families to develop citizenship identity and actively pursue their rights as members of the Greek society. The Department of Primary Education of the University of Patras collaborated with The Institute of Continuing Education for Adults (IDEKE) in order to develop educational programmes such as ‘Psychosocial support and counselling for ROMA families’ that promoted social integration of Roma families.

The National Intervention Programme ‘The Education of Roma Children from the Regions of Epirus, Western Greece, Ionian and Thessaly’ involved a specific action on the psychosocial and counselling support of Roma families in Western Greece. The particular action (*Action 3: Mediating for Roma adults to have access to Parents Schools, SCSs and KEEs*) aimed to:

1. inform Roma adults about school and health issues, citizenship rights,
2. acquaint them with learning procedures so as to reduce their school fear and empower their personalities,
3. coordinate parents schools so as to build a bridge between Roma and Greek citizens and help them overcome their stereotypes,
4. initiate teacher trainings so as to help them communicate with the families in order to integrate Roma in school activities,
5. schedule meetings with local authorities so as to form a positive attitude towards Roma communities

The action team, consisting of psychologists, social workers and educators, interacted with Roma families, schools and local authorities on a weekly basis.

## Interventions in Western Greece

### *Eight Parents’ Schools*

During the last four months of 2011, a particular intervention was initiated and focused on adult Roma education. Mediators encouraged young adults and parents of the Roma community to participate in eight Parents’ Schools (with 15-18 Roma parents participating at each school) that were established in specific locations with large numbers of Roma families in Western Greece (Table 1). Schools were led by professional psychologists and trained social workers.

**Table 1. Parents’ Schools in Western Greece (September – December 2011)**

REGION	PARTICIPANTS	ROMA REGISTRATIONS	
		MALES	FEMALES
SAGEIKA (ACHAIA)	19	11	8
PATRAS (ACHAIA)	12	4	8
EGIO (ACHAIA)	16	6	10
MEGANITI (ACHAIA)	5	0	5
GASTOUNI (ILEIA)	12	0	12
LECHENA (ILEIA)	12	0	12
MESOLOGGI (ETOLOAKARNANIA)	20	7	13
MESOLOGGI (ETOLOAKARNANIA)	11	5	6

TOTAL	107	33	74
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The intervention enhanced Roma parents' skills to overcome difficulties, gave them the opportunity to talk about serious problems such as unemployment, racism, abuse, drugs and alcohol, health issues, child pregnancy. The schools tried to alter rooted stereotypes with respect to employment, education, and access to public services. Parents counselling aimed to strengthen family relationships, friendship networks, to enhance community participation and develop trust between parents and school communities. Another goal was to reduce roma students' dropout rates by altering parents' perception for education.

### *Second Chance Schools*

The eight participants that had finished primary school were encouraged to enroll in SCSs (Table 2). Since the possession of a junior high school graduation certificate (compulsory education) is the precondition for most types of employment, the great majority of adult roma are not able to apply for a job. The institution of Second Chance Schools has been developed as an effort to combat the social exclusion of adults who have not finished basic education and do not have the necessary qualifications and skills to adapt to modern vocational requirements. Graduates are issued with a leaving certificate equivalent to that of the Lower Secondary School leaving certificate. This entitles them to register with the Unified Lyceum, Technical Vocational Educational Institutes and to apply for jobs.

**Table 2. Secondary Education for Roma young adults (School Year 2011-2012)**

SECOND CHANCE SCHOOLS	REGION	ROMA REGISTRATIONS	
		MALES	FEMALES
1	PYRGOS	2	0
2	PATRA	1	0
3	AGRINIO	5	0
TOTAL		8	

### *Literacy Classes*

The evaluation of parents' schools revealed their need to learn how to write and read in the Greek language. During the first four months of 2012, University of Patras coordinated five (5) literacy classes for Roma adults. The main reasons for applying for these courses are:

- for helping their children with lessons at school,

- as a preparation for taking the exams held by the *Ministry of National Education*, so as to take the primary education certificate. This is the requirement for them enrolling in second chance schools,
- so as to have better interaction with Greek citizens and local authorities.

**Table 3. Literacy Classes for Roma young adults (January – April 2012)**

REGION	PARTICIPANTS	Greek Language Courses for Roma Adults	
		MALES	FEMALES
SAGEIKA (ACHAIA)	7	3	4
PATRAS (ACHAIA)	12	4	8
PARALIA (ACHAIA)	11	11	0
MESOLOGGI (ETOLOAKARNANIA)	18	18	0
GASTOUNI (ILIA)	10	1	9
TOTAL	58	37	21

## Discussion

### *Factors influencing access to education and attainment*

According to Roma parents' evaluations, they feel socially isolated as they often face problems with local authorities and schools. Moreover, high unemployment, substandard housing, drug problems and poor access to health services create a vicious circle of poverty, exclusion and marginalisation that affects their ability to participate in and benefit from education. Some parents fear that participation in education and indeed educational success could alienate their children from their culture (they have different norms, traditions, values). However, parents' schools helped them adopt a more positive attitude towards education after being encouraged to participate in school activities. The Roma parents notified that they tried to persuade their children (dropouts) to go back to school.

Moreover, access to education and the educational attainment of Roma is affected by direct and systemic discrimination and exclusion in education. According to parents' evaluations, other factors influencing could be their own low educational level that affects their capacity to support their children in their homework, lowering their aspirations. They also feel excluded from Greek schools and they avoid enrolling their children to primary school because of bureaucratic requirements for formal documentation and proof of vaccination. In addition, there is lack of pre-school

education for Roma children, which is crucial for early assimilation of school norms and expected behavioural patterns, but also for developing proficiency in language.

Another factor critically important for educational achievement could be the absence of Roma related material and information in curricula and lack of resources relating to pupils' experiences. Moreover, some teachers, who have not been properly trained to deal with ethnically mixed classes, are at risk for early burnout and developing an indifferent attitude. Prejudice is also expressed in harassment, racial slurs and scapegoating at school. Eventually, parents' own experiences of discrimination and prejudice prevented them from realising how formal educational qualifications can be translated into improved life and employment chances.

### ***Educational Measures***

Therefore, educational authorities could design and implement awareness raising campaigns promoting pre-school education at local level, involving Roma representatives and local authorities. The focus should be on concrete measures to involve Roma parents in pre-school education in order to alleviate fears of assimilation or harassment. Schools must attract parents by respecting their values and cultural identity. Cultural identity is an essential component of personality and social relationships, so it should be recognised and respected by the school. Educational authorities should ensure that Roma history and culture are included in textbooks. Material on important contributions Roma made in individual countries and Europe should be provided. Also, they should ensure that teachers working in culturally mixed classes receive special training. Teachers should also be made aware that they need to engage Roma more in class and not de-motivate them by placing lower demands upon them.

Additionally, schools could monitor systematically non-attendance or truancy and involve actively the parents in ensuring that children attend school regularly. Thus schools will also come to understand the reasons for non-attendance and develop appropriate responses. Furthermore, principals and teachers could highlight successful educational attainment by Roma pupils, and relevant authorities could ensure that qualified individuals are supported in their search for appropriate employment in order to show the link between educational attainment and improved life chances. The school environment should make strong efforts to engage Roma parents in school related activities in order to enhance mutual understanding. Schools must attract parents acknowledging their contribution to the education of their children. Eventually, local authorities need to provide Roma families with facilities to improve their standard of living.

### ***Benefits from Intervention in Western Greece***

The specific intervention in Western Greece, co-ordinated from the University of Patras in collaboration with IDEKE had already showed some positive outcomes in respect of behavioural changes. Both parents' schools and literacy classes promoted active

participation of Roma parents at school activities in order to enhance mutual understanding. The adult educators encouraged drop-out young adults to enrol for second chance programmes and convinced Roma parents to encourage their youngsters to finish primary school and participate also in secondary education.

The specific action of the University of Patras, that is part of a national intervention provided mediators that gave the Roma access to quality healthcare and social services, as well as initiated vaccinations for Roma children so as to be able to attend school in September. All colleagues co-operated with local authorities to provide Roma families with facilities to improve their standard of living (there was need to provide access to public utilities such as water, electricity, gas because of poor housing conditions).

The counsellors promoted attitudes of openness, acceptance, solidarity and mutual respect, encouraged the development of pro-social skills, sensitized about school attendance, and encouraged parent-teacher communication. The University also co-ordinated teacher trainings, in order to elaborate innovative teaching methods, familiarise them with the Roma culture.

Our action aspired to the building of communication bridges, referring to the co-operation between Roma families, schools and local communities. Our ultimate goal is to raise awareness that Roma families should be treated like any other EU citizens with equal access to all fundamental rights and active participation in the socio-economic context of our society. This intervention is part of a European Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies that provides the opportunity for joining forces at all levels (EU, national, regional) and with all stakeholders, including the Roma, to address one of the most serious social challenges in Europe: putting an end to the exclusion of Roma. Now is the time to change good intentions into more concrete actions (European Commission, 2011).

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