FACT SHEET

Preschool education of Roma children in Europe

Roma occupy a disadvantaged position in education systems throughout the EU. Most Roma children and young people either attend segregated schools or do not have access to the same quality of education as those from the majority societies. Over 80% of Roma children in various countries, such as Slovakia and Bulgaria, face school segregation which prevents them from accessing higher education and entering into the labour market. Comprehensive EU and national policies aimed at integration of the Roma population into mainstream education and the improvement of the school performance of Roma are missing. According to experts, pre-school education could support Roma children to acquire the necessary language skills, at least for those who use Romanes as their family language, and to get familiar with learning methods which will make their entry into the school system easier. This fact sheet is aimed at fostering the discussion on pre-school education as a means to promote the integration of Roma children into main stream education.

Definition

Pre-school education is defined as any organised provision outside of the children's home in the age rage of zero to seven years old. Other frequently used terms are early childhood education, kindergarten, playgroup, nursery, and pre-grade one. The age at which children begin their formal education with the primary school varies from country to country, but it is mainly between six and seven years. UNESCO pursues a more comprehensive approach with regard to pre-school education not limiting it only to educational matters. According to the UNESCO, "Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is more than a preparatory stage assisting the child's

transition to formal schooling. Today, early childhood policies are placed within a broader context of social development, gender equity and poverty reduction." ECCE programmes attend to health, nutrition, security and learning which provide children's holistic development[1].

Pre-school education in the European Union

Enrolment in pre-school education is almost always voluntary in EU countries. Only in Luxembourg and the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland) education is compulsory for four-year-old children. In most Member States early childhood education is provided by the public sector from the age of 3. The participation of four-year-old children in pre-school education is increasing in all Member States, and depends on the provision that is available. Pre-school enrolment increases as the children get older[2].

In most of the Member States, the rate of children between 3 and 5 years old attending pre-schooling fluctuates between 70 and 95 per cent[3]. There are no official statistics disaggregated on ethnic origin of children in pre-school education in the European Union. Nevertheless, several studies reveal that the enrolment of Romani children is markedly bellow the majority population. In Romania, for example, while 17% of the Roma population attended early childhood education, the rate of the non-Roma was nearly 60%. Although Hungary has 90% kindergarten attendance, Roma living in isolated settlements are disproportionately represented in the remaining 10%.

In the majority of the countries pre-school education tends to be fee-paying, regardless of whether they are run by public authorities or private bodies.

[1] See the Early Childhood and Care Education site of the UNESCO website on: http://www.unesco.org/en/early-childhood/

[2] Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (2009) Key Data on Education in Europe. Available on: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/105EN.pdf

[3] See statistics of EUROSTAT on pre-school education in the EU available on: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/ressources/eurydice/pdf/0_integral/052EN.pdf

Barriers to access pre-school education among Roma children

The most common factors hampering Roma children from attending pre-schooling are[4]:

- Poverty: In many cases pre-school is linked to fees and other associated expenses. Given the large parts of Roma facing poverty and extreme poverty, many Roma families cannot afford with those expenses. Poverty and social exclusion act as factors hampering the development of children in pre-school age.
- Lack of information: In many cases Roma parents are not informed on the benefits of pre-schooling or how they can enrol their children into pre-schools.
- Geographical segregation: Many Roma families do not have the transport means to send their children to kindergartens which are often far away from Roma settlements.
- Lack of correct individual and family documentation, e.g. birth certificates.
- High attendance of special schools by Roma children: In many cases this is a disincentive for Roma parents to place their children in pre-school education. Roma parents believe that their children will end up in schools for children with special needs or segregated schools with very low level of education anyway.
- Fears of the official language: Some Roma parents fear that their children would not be competent in the official language of instruction at an early age.
- Fears of racism: Roma parents fear to send their children to pre-school institutions where they may become victims of racism and discrimination.

[4] UNESCO and Council of Europe: Towards quality education for Roma children: transition from early childhood to primary education. Audit of pre-school provision. Briefing Paper for Experts' UNESCO/ Council of Europe Meeting. DGIV/EDU/ROM (2007)4. Paris, 10th-11th September 2007. Available on: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/roma/Source/Audit-PreschoolProvision_EN.pdf

Advantages of pre-school education

Numerous are the studies which give account on the advantages of pre-school education as a means to support children to success in the formal education, especially among children living in poverty, of social disadvantaged milieus and minorities' and migrants' children who do not speak the language of the majority society as mother tongue and who traditionally occupy the lowest level in the education system[5]. There are not many studies on pre-school attendance among Roma children. Nevertheless, most of the findings related to attendance of pre-school education by minorities (especially in the United States of America and Canada) and migrants (in Western Europe) could apply to the Roma case. For example, a study conducted in Germany found out that attending kindergarten in Germany increased the likelihood of migrant children attending higher level of education[6].

The European Commission in its Green Paper "Migration & mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems" states that pre-school education can bring major benefits by equipping migrant children with language skills for later schooling[7]. This would apply for Roma migrant children and for Roma children who do not speak the language of the majority societies. Learning in their first language can promote the culture capital and self confidence of migrant children and this may be a key asset for their future employability.

Studies have found that pre-school education alone will not ensure the success of children of ethnic minority families from disadvantaged milieus to succeed in the education system. Pre-school education can only contribute to narrow the education gap if the use of high quality day care centres and pre-primary schools for children of migrant and ethnic minority families is significantly increased[8]. It should also be stressed that social inclusion is most important in the way out of poverty for the Roma, and this will increase their chances of success at school.

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[5] Breaking the Cycle of Exclusion, Roma Children in South East Europe, UNICEF, Serbia, 2007

[6] Spieß, C.K., Büchel, F., and Wagner, G. G. (2003) Children's School Placement in Germany. Does Kindergarten Attendance Matter? In: Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 18, 255-270

[7] European Commission: GREEN PAPER. Migration & mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems. COM (2008) 423 final. Brussels, 3.7.2008. Available on: http://ec.europa.eu/education/school21/com423_en.pdf

[8] Leseman, Paul P.M.: The impact of high quality education and care in the development of young children: Review of the literature, in: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (2009) Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities. Available on: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/098EN.pdf

Good practices

Throughout the European Union, various measures have been implemented to raise the education level of children from socially disadvantaged groups. In most cases, these measures target migrant children and children from disadvantaged milieus but the practices could be also applied to disadvantaged Roma children as well. Common measures include special language training programmes for the enhancement of the second language or the appointment of extra staff in mainstream settings which would teach disadvantaged youths[9].

Examples of policies and projects promoting the enrolment of Roma children into pre-school education are minimal but can be found throughout Europe at national and local levels. In countries of the Roma Decade[10] pre-schooling is one of the focus of the education policies targeting disadvantaged groups. There has been progress reported in terms of access for the Roma to some form of early childhood education[11]. Various countries have some incentives to promote pre-school education among Roma, e.g. in Hungary, free meals are given to disadvantaged children in schools during early years.

The Croatian Action Plan of Roma Inclusion drafted in the framework of the Roma Decade includes an objective to inform Roma children and parents about the importance of pre-school education (learning Croatian, developing working habits, socialization, social skills, self-control and overall development of the child's mental and physical abilities).

Another example of good practice is the “Pre-school Teaching Kit” developed by the Council of Europe to prepare Roma children for entry into school. This education programme aims to help Roma children develop basic skills needed to start primary school, learn how to study, educates parents about the necessity of knowledge, improves children’s analytical and reasoning skills and encourages their imagination[12].

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[9] Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (2009) Key Data on Education in Europe (2009) Early Childhood and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities. Available on: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/098EN.pdf

[10] The Roma Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2010 is an initiative of the Open Society Institute (OSI) and the World Bank to promote the social inclusion of Roma. It has the political commitment of Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Croatia, Montenegro, the Czech Republic and Macedonia.

[11] Annual Report 2006, Roma Education Fund, Budapest, 2007

[12] To download the „Pre-School Teaching Kit“ go to: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/roma/preschool_en.asp

General recommendations

- Develop comprehensive programmes aimed at social inclusion of Roma children from impoverished families
- Develop and implement comprehensive policies promoting the enrolment of Roma children in pre-school education
- Make Pre-school education accessible for Roma: free of charges, geographically accessible, adequate information provided for the parents
- Comprehensive information and awareness raising campaigns targeting policy makers, administrators and Roma parents.
- Conducting comprehensive surveys on pre-schooling among Roma communities
- Funding programmes for making pre-school education accessible for Roma.
- Promoting bi-lingual pre-schooling for children speaking Romanes as a mother tongue
- Promoting the enrolment of Roma in the education of nurseries
- Hiring of personnel speaking Romanes for providing a bi-lingual service where Romanes is the predominant language among Roma children
- Designing and implementing programmes providing Roma parents with the necessary skills to support their children through their pre-school and school education