

Equality of chances in education through teachers training and educational policies.

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Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) is a nongovernmental organization with headquarter in United States of America and other offices in the Central and Eastern Europe, working for improving the inter-ethnic relations in the region. PER has a broad past experience in engaging and facilitating the dialogue on important inter-ethnic issues.

Project on Ethnic Relations for Central and East, South East of Europe from Bucharest is a Romanian nongovernmental organization dedicated to promote the inter-ethnic dialogue, civic multiculturalism and to support the inter-ethnic peace in the extended region of the Central, East and South –East of Europe. You can find more details about the projects developed by our organization on www.per-usa.org and www.per.org.ro.

Starting with the first years of activity, our organization was interested on issues facing Roma community. PER realized that one of the obstacles the Roma community representation was confronting with was the lack of well trained specialists. Due to limited resources we had available, we did not afford to organize extended trainings on politics or administration that is why our organization was concentrated on diminishing and banning the prejudices at the every single social and political level. One of the most successful programs PER developed on this is the series of trainings annually organized, at the national level, for the teachers, looking for a proportional participation from all the counties.

As a first step, we would have liked to contribute to equal chances for Roma children in schools, objective possible to be realized especially with the help of the teachers from their won communities. Therefore, from 1996 to 1998 the participants to the educational projects of PER were exclusively Roma teachers who assumed their Roma identity. The trainings offered to the participants the knowledge on how to prepare the classes, suitable teaching methods for training children from disfavored families, development of the work relations with co-workers but with parents also, as well as basic information on human rights and minority protection. At our trainings was permanently present, by its representatives, the Ministry of Education and Research through the General Department for Education in National Minority Languages.

In 1999, together with the General Department for Education in National Minority Languages within the Ministry of Education and Research, we initiated a series of trainings for new appointed school inspectors responsible for Roma education. At the beginning there were 26 Roma inspectors, 16 non-Roma inspectors and now, in the 42 counties, there are 18 Roma inspectors and 24 Non-Roma inspectors (Romanians and Hungarians) taking care of the development, at the county level, of the Roma education. During the trainings, on going in present, other organizations came along and became aware of this issue. Even though the school

inspector positions were occupied by qualified people, they did not have experience on the administrative paper work so they were not aware of the challenges or of the advantages of the system. Also, their nomination was not welcomed in the majority of the school inspectorates, and there was a strong will of giving them other tasks then promoting the education for Roma children.

In order to stop these phenomena, during the first training was created a clear job description for those positions recognized also by the Ministry of Education and Research.

Understating the lack of the Roma teachers, the school inspectors created and requested a training program for Romani teachers in the system of education from the distance. This educational system from the distance was needed from many reasons: young ones coming from communities with no financial means did not have the possibilities to go to University without working, for such a number of years, and if they already work as primary school teachers or teaching-assistants they can graduate University in the same time. The chances for them to stay in their communities afterwards are more likely. The Institute for University Studies CREDIS accepted this long distance study system and therefore the number of the teachers teaching Romani language increased from 5 (in 1998) to 350 (in 2007).

During our trainings we helped editing books and auxiliary materials needed for teaching Romani language. Within the PHARE program, for example, we contributed to creating a primer for Roma primary school teachers from Mures County, as well as to preparing a multimedia program designated to children and facilitating Romani language learning. On a different Phare project, by the request of CRCR Cluj, we contributed by compiling a Civic Education Guide for Romani classes. Such materials were prepared during Phare projects for Roma by many other organizations and schools but on a small scale, from 100 to 1000 pieces and their impact were isolated at local level.

As we closely approached the education of the Roma children subject, the serious issues became more evident, especially the issues the schools from local areas were confronted with. These phenomena affected mainly the non-Roma teachers, unprepared to face the increased number of the Roma students in their classes, with children coming to school with no previous training in a kindergarten and obviously disadvantaged from their day one in school.

The MECT initiative to organize, for children with no previous kindergarten experience, „seasonal kindergarten” for a month, it is very commendable. The implementation of such kindergartens was conducted by nongovernmental organizations, dedicated to education for Roma children, such: Ruhama organization from Oradea, Save the Children, Amare Romentza and others. These seasonal kindergartens still depend, financially, on MECT partners such as local authorities and county school inspectorates, even though MECT, together with Ruhama organization, won the project „School for everyone”, project financed by the Structural Funds. In the case of the county school inspectorates, they needed, for this year, to administrate from their own budget and with own human resources the project. Not all the involved factors managed to organize the seasonal kindergartens. One example of acceptable administration is the one from

Mures County where the CSI Mures selected the localities and the personnel for seasonal kindergartens in partnership with Divers Association. When was found out that the 2008 seasonal kindergartens cannot be supported by the project „School for everyone”, the Town Halls of the nine localities, except for Targu-Mures, offered the food for the children, the kindergartens provided their teachers and Divers Association provided volunteers, Roma students, as teaching-assistants. In the localities where school mediators exist, they contributed to regular frequency of the children to the classes. The example of the seasonal schools from Mures county is not, maybe, the best one, but is the only thing that nongovernmental organizations, with balanced dedication and following the MECT stipulations, can provide.

It is preferable, financially but from the human resources point of view too, that educational system offers equal chances to children entering the system and right now one of the methods is the seasonal kindergarten model. The seasonal kindergartens are needed for children starting the first school years without kindergarten experience.

Another method to increase the chances for success in the educational system for children coming from disadvantaged environments, in majority of them Roma, is the „tutoring”. This project is developed within PHARE, but also by other nongovernmental organizations, especially Save the Children. Even though this project proved its utility and efficiency, the educational system does not provide significant budgets to introduce the method on national level. The 2008 is the year when by accessing the Structural Funds, a significant number of schools will benefit from financial means to implement the „afternoon school”, but there are not known yet the budgetary allocations in order to sustain this project in the following years.

An essential factor in educating Roma children and the children coming from disadvantaged environments is improving the educational conditions outside the school. One step is to create a dialogue between the school and the parents. In case of the Roma children even persuading them on the priority to come to school is important.

That is why the school mediator proved to be the most useful person, coming from the communities; he/she has the trust of the community members and can create the link between the school and community members.

It is a wonderful initiative of MECT to introduce in the educational system the profession of tutor, but leaving to the school inspectorates the decision on the positions number, not introducing new positions jeopardizes the success of the initiative. There are counties where the school inspectorates or local authorities understood the importance of the school tutors for the Roma children and they found internal resources to hire 28 school tutors. In the majority of the counties because MECT did not provided the finances for tutors, there are only tutors paid from PHARE funds. It is recommended a close evaluation made by MECT to the requests made by the school inspectorates on the number of tutors allocated, the number of tutors required by the schools, therefore by the local communities. An efficient answer needs to be found to these requests.

Even though the methods used to provide success for the Roma and disadvantaged children will be financially offered for the future years, it is still needed training on specific teaching methods, cultural and social background of the children and also on very good communication skills. All these are still not part of the initial training given to Romanian teachers. Even though there are slight initiatives at the university level, those initiatives are not very well focused.

The necessity of the trainings on didactic methods, Roma culture and history and the prejudice mechanisms was recognized not only by our organization, but also by the other teachers. The number of the applications we received for such trainings organized in partnership with MECT, proofs this point.

As organizing a complete and informative training in 3-4 days only it is not possible, our objective was, first of all, to inform the participants on many aspects of Roma community history and its influence on the Roma social reality. Besides history, we emphasized the importance of understanding the prejudice and stereotype mechanisms which usually lead to different types of discrimination, as well as on the growing tendency for school segregation and conflicts. In addition, our trainings offered different didactical methods to support teachers when working differently with children in order to increase their interest to the subject taught. All these were followed by CD-s with support materials, so that teachers find information and help even after the trainings. Mr. Sarau Gheorghe, the teacher-councilor on Roma children educational issues from the Department, managed to create a debate group on Roma education, group attended bypeople.

While the trainings created by us were focused on Roma children education, the trainings offered within the PHARE projects targeted, besides this, aspects of the school inclusion addressed to children with different needs.

The information obtained by us from the training participants is the followings:

- In the participants classes there are, on average, 11 Roma students and their percentage from the total number of the school students is on average 36.5%. There are schools where the percentage of the Roma students reaches over 80%
- The most important issue in the elementary classes is the lack of the kindergarten experience of the children. Roma children do not do well, stop coming to schools and sometimes their instructors pass them but they only limit to reading and writing. A recent phenomenon, the fear for being accused of discrimination, contributes to the number of the students graduating elementary school even though they are not well prepared. This fact, unfortunately, eliminates the possibilities for these students to continue their studies because, on one hand they are not well prepared and, on the other hand, only with elementary classes they cannot be integrated in the programs for school recovery.
- While in the primary school the instructors easily communicate with the children, they work harder with the parents who do not consider education as priority and therefore do not offer to their children the needed conditions.

- In the secondary school the Roma children are often perceived as aggressive and this behavior is determined by the unsuitable conditions of life and their impossibility to reach the increased school demands.
- Applying the „tutoring” education in the afternoon can lead to impressive results. Even though this method will mean a greater chance to continue studies for children coming from disadvantaged environments, it works only within some project created by the nongovernmental organizations or PHARE projects.
- The majority of the instructors complain that Roma children education jeopardizes their status within the community and their effort is not recognized even by the school inspectorates, not to mention they have to teach in the most neglected schools.
- The schools Principals complain that due to the big number of the Roma children the non-Roma families sent their children to different schools and therefore the „natural segregation” phenomena appears leading to a lower level of education.
- The majority of the teachers’ denies the existence of racist manifestations in schools, but admits the prejudice presence which confines the quality education. The instructors ask for school mediators as a link between school and the Roma community.

PER program offered to the teachers extends the training obtained in the initial training stage, from the diversity perspective, emphasizing the ethnical cultural intimacy.

Almost simultaneously, from 1998-1999, organizations as Save the Children and Timisoara Intercultural Institute started to provide training classes to non-Roma teachers working with Roma students. Each training was two days and was meant to support the teachers by offering novelty information showing the positive impact, in the process of passing on knowledge, of the beliefs and superstitions, of the entire equipment of Roma values created in the concept of *rromanipen*.

In 2006, the Regional Centre PER, together with the Ministry of Education and Research through the General Department for Education in National Minority Languages, moves to training the national trainers on educational *rromanipenului*, selecting as potential beneficiaries the previous candidates to the Program. In three stages: Training exam/examination, developed in 2006, on 6 days for each, was examined and trained 100 trainers on educational *rromanipen* as per the following agenda:

A. Specific Roma Constitutive

1. Sub-constitutive „Specific educational inheritance of the pre-school child and of the Roma child of first grade- obscure to non-Roma instructor
2. Roma traditions and Roma social history, their impact in the educational process with Roma children
3. Inter-culturally and interethnic relations as introduction modality to” new educations” in Romanian educational system designated to Roma children.

B. Legislative constitutive of the educational policies and communication for Roma

1. The educational offer for Roma

- a)** The legislation on education in minority languages and the shaded legislation for Roma education, including the Roma language, literature and history from the perspective of the additional teaching curriculum.
- b)** The shape of the education in Romani language and educational policies for Roma.
- c)** Social policies (governmental and nongovernmental) on Roma.
- d)** Legislation on banning discrimination and segregation in education.

2. Communication techniques with pre-school and school Roma in the school environment.

3. Techniques for communicating with Roma parents and Roma from community.

The human resources trained this way cover partially the need for training, from this perspective, at the local level (in cascade-programs, developed by CCD-s, in programs at local school/schools level, in national or international programs in this field/

They also support the implementation of MECT stipulations. PER also contributed to the editing and adopting of those stipulations:

- MECT Order no. 1540/19 Jul. **2007** on banning the school segregation of Roma children and approving the Methodology to prevent and eliminate the school segregation for Roma children (published in the Official Monitor no. 692/11.X.2007);
- MECT Order no. 1539/19 Jul. **2007** on regulations for hiring school tutors and design his/her activity (published in Official Monitor no. 670/1.X.2007);
- MECT Order no. 1529/18 Jul. **2007** on developing diversity in the national curriculum (published in Official Monitor no. 670/1.X.2007);

The dedicated work of the teachers following the training stages offered by our organization but also the enforcement of those MECT Orders can be considered partial successes of our organization while trying to improve the Roma education. With a more assertive support from the teachers and other Roma and non-Roma organizations, especially from the entire educational structure, indeed equal chances to education for children from the entire country can be created. The existing discrepancy between children coming from disadvantaged environment or Roma children and the majority of Romanian children is far from being insignificant. The school segregation of Roma children is made despite the orders and, surprisingly, by increasing the number of Roma children participating in the educational process., because non –Roma parents choose different schools for their children, where is not a large number of Roma students, even though these schools are far away and involves more effort for them. All these show the school segregation

Phenomena cannot be banned on legislative way only. There are needed support measures to fight existing prejudices. One possible method is to provide the best quality education in schools with segregation tendencies. In order to do this there are needed serious financial and human resources, a map with the segregation schools from Romania and also didactic support for those schools so that the segregation phenomena can be naturally reversed, by avoiding conflicts and not only through legislative methods, which do not guarantee the sustainability.

By education quality we mean providing the qualified human resource, qualified from the sensibility point of view too. This means a teacher ready to face specific needs of individual child. We think the needed infrastructure is auxiliary for the educational process, the priority being the qualified teacher. Unfortunately, the Phare projects managed only partially to provide all these, allocating more financial resources to infrastructure than to human resources.

In those presented so far we showed the importance of the educational policies targeted to Roma children and to children coming from disadvantaged environments on local level mainly by the teachers understanding the specific needs and ready to answer to those needs, but also the existence of a partnership between school and local authorities and nongovernmental organizations. Those need to be followed by networks of Roma teachers and auxiliary staff capable to increase the community member trust in school as an institution where their children are safe and where these „example teachers” belong to. In the same time, they need to integrate in the system, from the language point of view, the children, especially the children who do not speak Romanian before entering the school. This integration should not be done by linguistic assimilation but by developing the maternal language knowledge besides the ones of Romania, or, depending of the case, of Hungarian. Eliminating the linguistic identity can have a negative effect on self-esteem of the child who speaks Romani in community and in school the language is not considered equal with Romanian or Hungarian.

For Roma students coming from communities where only Romani is spoken, teaching Romani tradition and history, as well as the language, can help increasing the Roma students' self-esteem and contribute to fighting against school abandon.

All those described above are methods can help increasing the quality of educational process for all children from Romani, but especially for Roma children and for children coming from disadvantaged environments. The urge for teachers to know and accept diversity can be the most efficient method even for fighting against school segregation, which cannot be neglected when we talk about education for Roma children, disfavored children, and children from rural area where a large number of national minorities is. Our organization wants to continue, together with MECT and other organizations, the initial approaches or the ones conducted already in order to provide equal chances for all children from Romania. We also hope our initiatives can be continuously supported by MECT and our expertise is needed.