

Good practices in Roma education in Bulgaria during the years of transition¹

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The aim of this paper is to present good educational practices from Bulgaria that relate to Roma education. In the so-called Years of Transition, educational conditions changed considerably. Non-governmental organizations have attempted to promote high-quality education for Roma children. The Bulgarian Ministry of Education has made various changes in legislation which now allow Roma children to receive mother tongue education as well as intercultural education with a focus on Romani language, culture and history. This paper provides a short overview of projects that have been implemented in kindergarten, primary and secondary schools, as well as adult literacy and education since the time of transition.

Introduction and background

During the communist years in Bulgaria, schooling was compulsory for all children, including the Roma, and therefore the percentage of Roma with a high school level education was higher (though still dismal) in comparison with the present (approximately 0.3% vs 0.01%). The communist regime had both positive and negative impacts on Roma students. One positive aspect was that most Roma students attended school, and one negative aspect was that bilingualism among Roma children was not perceived as an advantage but rather as a disadvantage. Romani language was not seen as a tool for language education, but instead as a means for acculturating and assimilating Roma children in schools. This was only one of the many assimilation measures that affected the entire Roma population in Bulgaria. Other practices included forcing Muslim Roma to change their names, forbidding the use of Romani language in public places, etc. After World War II, Roma were placed in settlements (mahalas), which still exist not only in Bulgaria, but in other East European countries as well. Usually, Roma children attended schools within

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Roma settlements, which were segregated from mainstream public schools. If Roma children did attend mainstream schools, segregated classes were created for them.

Only a small percentage of Roma continued their education at college or university level, since children educated in inner-city Roma schools did not receive a high-quality education. Often, teachers who taught in these schools were not qualified enough. This is evidenced by the fact that few had any knowledge of how to work with bilingual Roma students. Some Roma students were sent to so-called 'special schools'—schools for the mentally retarded—because they did not speak Bulgarian well enough. Bulgarian, which is a second language for Roma children, was taught to Roma students using the same textbooks and methodology deemed appropriate for ethnically Bulgarian children who had Bulgarian as their mother tongue. Thus, no attention was paid to the bilingualism and biculturalism of Roma children. During the communist years, Roma students also did not have the right to study their own language. The curriculum and textbooks lacked information about Roma history and culture, and there was also no information about other minorities. Students' diversity and multiculturalism was not taken in consideration.

It is important to point out that one will find both Muslim Roma and Orthodox Christian Roma in Bulgaria. In areas with a large (ethnically) Turkish population, including parts of north-east and southern Bulgaria that border Turkey, one finds Muslim Roma who speak both Turkish and Romani. In western parts of the country and in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, the Roma are Orthodox Christian and speak mainly Romani and Bulgarian. Though there is considerable religious and cultural diversity, hardly any consideration was given to these differences (in both the school system and society at large).

During the past 15 years, the education of Roma children has become an important topic for educators in Bulgaria. The Ministry of Education has introduced Romani language education, and Roma students have the right to study their mother tongue four times a week in mainstream Bulgarian schools. Textbooks in the Romani language for students and teachers' guides have been published. Roma adults with a high school education have been trained to teach Romani using a bilingual approach, (i.e. content area teaching in Bulgarian to improve literacy in Bulgarian as well).

Recently, researchers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Roma activists have become interested in the educational problems of Roma students, and the NGOs, in particular, have initiated educational projects at different levels. International NGOs, such as the Open Society Institute (OSI) in Budapest and the World Bank have established the 'Roma Educational Fund' with the aim of encouraging more Roma educational initiatives all over Europe. The main goal of the Fund is financially to support new ideas that strive to improve Roma Education in Eastern Europe.

Roma children and bilingualism

Roma children all over the world are bilingual. From a very early age, children learn one or two other languages in addition to Romani and, very often, they will

use multiple languages in everyday communication in the Roma community or in mainstream society. Only recently have educators begun to recognize Roma children's bilingualism and started to think about this issue from an educational perspective.

The *Cambridge encyclopedia of language* (Crystal, 1997) distinguishes 'societal bilingualism' from 'individual bilingualism', and the term 'bilingualism' is used for people who acquire two or more languages simultaneously. Although authors have defined the notion of 'bilingualism' differently, the one given by Weinreich (1968) is the classical one. He states: 'the process of successful use of two languages is called bilingualism, and the person using it is called a bilingual'. The definition points to the main feature of the phenomenon, namely the functioning of two languages in the process of communication between speakers.

The major problem which linguists face in studying bilingualism is in the question of how many systems the bilingual individual acquires—one or two? In answering this question, bilingualism should be treated as a continuum, whose end points are 'mixed bilingualism' (when the two languages are merged into one single system) and 'coordinating bilingualism' (when the two systems are distinct).

In the case of the Roma, one often encounters 'incomplete' bilingualism. Roma children aged six to seven are not fluent in the official language of their home country. Teaching Roma children in Bulgarian is not seen as teaching a second language, because the children are already in a Bulgarian language environment. Based on these facts, researchers have made the assumption that bilingualism refers to the knowledge of two languages to a degree which allows an individual to switch freely from one language to another, depending on the communicative situation.

Depending on the interlocutors and the topic of the particular conversation, bilinguals decide which language to use. When the speaker changes from one language to another he/she is practicing 'code-switching'. Bell (1980) describes the following rules of bilingual code-switching:

- Sociolinguistic rules, coordinating the choice of the language with the social factors on a micro-level (i.e. on the level of individual use) or on a macro-level (i.e. the choice of the national language).
- Psychological rules, predefining the choice of the language according to the psychological factors typical of verbal planning, which precedes production.

However, there are also cultural factors which must be taken into account, such as religious and cultural practices. For example, a Muslim Roma child will have difficulty understanding many of the idiosyncrasies of Christian culture. Very often, teachers do not realize this small, but very important fact, and do not understand why a child does not behave in the expected way. For example, when the Muslim religious holiday of Ramadan is celebrated, Roma Muslim children do not attend school and the teachers fail to comprehend the reasons, because their misconception is that only ethnically Turkish children observe this holiday. Roma Muslim children will not eat a meal which contains pork and, if the school cafeteria does not have any other food available, these Roma children will refuse to eat. These kinds of

seemingly minor cultural problems can influence the educational process and, when teachers are poorly trained, they will not know how to handle these situations.

The pre-school education of Roma children

The contemporary Bulgarian educational system contains four levels: pre-school, kindergarten level; basic school (primary school: grades 1–4; secondary school: grades 5–8); high school: grades 9–12 (gymnasiums or technical schools); and universities and colleges.

Pre-school education focuses, on the one hand, on the physical development of the child and the child's socialization, and, on the other hand, the child's preparation for schooling. During these years, the child gains the knowledge and skills that will become the basis for his/her social functioning and will determine the child's life trajectory.

Projects that work for Roma

Successful projects with Roma children will be identified in this section. All of these have been implemented by different NGOs over the last 15 years, during the years of transition to a democratic society, and the projects mentioned below can be used as good educational models for other countries in Europe as well.

Initiated in Bulgaria in 1992, the Bulgarian National Committee of UNICEF was the first ever NGO educational project that concerned itself with mother tongue education in Romani. Based on experiences from other countries, the project focused its activities on working with children at the pre-school and school-age levels, in an attempt to contribute positively to the early socialization of Roma children.

The first problem that Bulgarian educators encountered was trying to prepare Roma children for schooling—taking into account that the period of literacy development is decisive for the development of their cognitive abilities. Here, the NGOs and the Bulgarian educators needed to become familiar with international practices such as the development of coherent oral speech and motor skills, etc., using mainly language games as an approach. It has been found that the sociocultural environment of bilingual Roma children is of great importance for the development of their language and communication skills, as well as for the necessity of helping children become more proficient in Bulgarian as a second language. Experimental bilingual textbooks (Romani–Bulgarian) were published and introduced in experimental kindergartens, and the bilingual approach was introduced for language teaching and preparation for literacy in Bulgarian. Using the mother tongue of the children as a tool of instruction with the help of Roma community workers, the children were successfully prepared for Bulgarian literacy instruction.

The 'Diversity' Balkan Foundation for Cross-Cultural Education and Understanding ('Diversity' BFCCEU) is another NGO that, since its establishment in 1994, has developed educational projects focusing on the language education of

Roma children and solving the educational problems of bilingual children in Bulgaria. Between 1997 and 2002, 'Diversity' BFCCEU published four children's books in the Romani language. These related to fairy tales, songs, poems and riddles. The use of the books in kindergarten classes by young, trained Roma Teacher Assistants has changed the attitude of teachers and Bulgarian children towards the Romani language, and enriched the language of Roma children.

Although the educational law does not allow Romani language education to take place in kindergarten classrooms, the experimental teaching of Romani had a positive impact on participating teachers' understanding regarding the importance of the mother language for the cognitive development of bilingual Roma children. The parents, on the other hand, came to understand better the importance of the written form of Romani and the use of children's books for the language development of their children.

Another important project with Roma pre-school children, implemented again by the 'Diversity' Balkan Foundation, was the 'home literacy' project. During special training sessions for unemployed parents from two different Bulgarian towns, the participants were trained to work with their children in the home environment in order to better prepare their children for schooling. An experimental bilingual (Bulgarian–Romani) textbook was introduced in order to develop the children's language skills as well. Later on, after the children became students in the first grade, their achievements were followed and compared with a group of Roma children who were not involved in the 'home literacy' project. The Roma children involved in the project showed higher results and were performing better on all tests.

Gradually, parallel to the activities of the 'Diversity' Balkan Foundation, some other NGOs started to display more and more active interest in developing and implementing educational projects on Romani as a mother language. At the same time, training sessions for teachers and kindergarten educators were organized to move towards the new reality of the country: democratization and acceptance of multiculturalism for educational purposes.

One of the most positive practices that have existed until recently in the field of pre-school education was a project implemented between the years 1999–2002, financed by the Socrates Programme. The 'Intercultural Education in Kindergarten' project was implemented in seven towns and 15 different kindergarten classrooms, including half-day kindergartens, whole-day kindergartens and combined kindergartens for children lacking parental protection.

The project's goal was to reinforce bilingual education in an intercultural environment within the kindergarten. The project consisted of five stages and involved 567 children, 220 parents and 78 teachers. During the first stage, a diagnostic test was administered to children aged three to seven years. The project also included Assistant Teachers (of Roma origin) working in the kindergartens. Care was taken to choose kindergartens what were already employing Roma Assistant Teachers so that the project only had to qualify them as classroom personnel.

The kindergartens involved in the project could be divided in two types: 'segregated' and 'integrated' kindergartens, and this classification was considered to be a

demographic marker. The second marker in the study was the socio-economic status of the parents. Some of the Roma communities in the study had higher socio-economic status, although Roma communities with low socio-economic status were involved as well. The third marker used in the study was home language. In some towns, the Roma children were bilingual, but there were towns in which the only language of the children was Bulgarian. There were also communities where the language of communication was a Turkish dialect. The language marker was of tremendous importance in the study. The fourth marker used in the research groups was religion—Muslim, Christian (Orthodox) or Protestant. Among the children involved in the study, all three religious groups were represented.

In the first stage, two kinds of measurements were carried out—motivation for school achievement and ability for social orientation.

The second stage was the training of the teachers who work in bilingual settings and so-called ‘teachers in the street’ who worked with street children. They organized a project called ‘Domestic Kindergartens’. ‘Teachers in the street’ took at-risk children (i.e. children who do not attend school or were otherwise deemed ‘street children’) and placed them with Roma families that were chosen based on a set of previously determined criteria. These ‘domestic kindergartens’ involved educators exactly like the ‘teachers in the street’, and their main task was to work with children aged five to seven. The teachers had to prepare these at-risk children to enter the first grade of school. The second stage of the project involved professional pedagogical training sessions with the teachers as well. The goal was for teachers to be trained in the ideas and techniques for educating within a multicultural environment. The parents, street teachers and ‘domestic kindergarten’ mothers were also involved in these training sessions.

The third stage of the project consisted of developing technology for education in a multiethnic environment. During the fourth stage, this new technology was implemented, and teachers were trained in this new technology for multicultural education. The fifth stage of the project was connected with the proliferation of the project’s ideas. Teachers trained other teachers, and parents trained other parents. During the sixth stage, methodology books were published for teachers, focusing on how to work in multicultural kindergartens.

The comparative study that followed illustrated the importance of both intercultural education in the kindergarten and the parents’ involvement in the ‘domestic kindergarten classrooms’. Both promote child school readiness and literacy readiness and instil in bilingual children a good command of the second language needed for school.

There are two obstacles to the introduction of these good practices, which unfortunately do not differ much from those encountered in any innovative practice in the sciences, arts or economy in Bulgaria: the lack of money and financial support from the Ministry of Education for implementation of the projects in mainstream schools and kindergartens. Both the NGO that developed the project and the municipality that tried to sustain it have few financial resources.

The primary and secondary education of Roma children

An important project in primary and secondary schools has been the endeavour to desegregate Roma schools. Several Roma NGOs, using the ‘bussing’ model from the USA from the 1950s and 1960s, initiated this project in 2000.

The desegregation education programme focused on the inclusion of Roma children in the general social environment. Living in segregated communities, the Roma children also study in segregated schools, and their exclusion from society often imparts negative consequences to the children’s school achievement. The desegregation project also aimed to create a welcoming environment for Roma children in order to promote a quality educational process. In conjunction with this, activities focusing on desegregation took place in these communities and several actions were taken to make the process more successful:

- moral support and cooperation from the municipality aimed at changing the general public’s opinion about desegregation of Romani schools
- support from the media aiming at popularizing the objectives, activities and envisioned results of the project
- attracting Bulgarian citizens and institutions to assist in accepting and teaching Roma children in Bulgarian schools.

Roma parents have played important roles in the process of desegregation. Many have established good connections with the schools to which their children are bussed. Lectures for parents have also been organized. In addition to transportation to school, the bussing programmes also provided the students with free breakfast and textbooks.

The key obstacle in the project related to the lack of teacher preparedness to work with bilingual Roma children and their limited practical experience in this field. Seminars were held for the teachers each month to help resolve this issue. Many issues were discussed during these seminar, including: Romani history and culture; specific characteristics of bilingual children; pedagogical work with Roma children; relationships between teachers and students and between Romani and Bulgarian children; the process of adaptation and the conditions for its acceleration and facilitation. Each school had a Roma Coordinator who was the ‘liaison’ between the schools and the families of the children.

Diverse activities were organized in the schools, which involved both Bulgarian and Romani students. There were also special activities for the Bulgarian and Roma parents.

School inspectors and school boards staged a competition for the most tolerant class of students. A set of criteria was provided to schools and the winners were selected and awarded.

The results of the projects were:

- community cooperation in the process of desegregation of schools with Roma children;
- new opportunities for Roma children to receive a better education;

- promoting both cultures—Romani and Bulgarian—for all students and their parents (i.e. intercultural education);
- reducing the level of discrimination of the majority towards the minority; and
- accelerating the process of Roma integration into society, recognizing their rights and giving them the opportunities for equal participation in economic, political and social spheres.

Adult Roma literacy and education

The team of ‘Diversity’ BFCCEU launched a project for the education of children who had dropped out of school. This project was financed by the Ministry of Education and Science and the local authorities. A community group was established, consisting of representatives of local educational institutions, local authorities, municipal experts in ethnic issues, school principals and the coordinator of educational projects of the Balkan Foundation. The mission of the community group was to support and assist children from various ethnic groups in their efforts to complete their education successfully and receive appropriate training.

Each village was required to identify all young people who did not have a school degree, were unemployed and without any professional qualifications. Following this, a meeting took place between the community group and the young people. At this meeting, the objectives, activities and results of the project were discussed. All those willing to enrol in the courses submitted their documents (an application and a certificate of completion of grade school). School principals prepared the necessary documentation in compliance with the requirements of the Ministry of Education and Science and the legislation. The following groups were formed: six groups covering grades 1–4, four groups for grades 5–8, and four groups for grades 9–11. Each group consisted of 12–15 trainees, including men and women of different ages. A total of 187 trainees across all courses participated.

The trainees were given lectures by qualified teachers on basic school subjects appropriate for their grade levels three times a week. They were administered exams, which complied with the provisions and regulations of the Educational Law. Some of the boys and girls received training in the field of agriculture, including the operation of agricultural machinery, and cultivation of fruits, vegetables and other plants.

The young people who enrolled in the training courses regularly attended classes and took exams and worked quite hard. Although the groups were co-educational, the boys and girls became friends and helped each other. Not a single conflict between trainees and teachers arose during the year. The teachers conscientiously fulfilled their duties. Experts in education and ethnic issues assisted in the project, and the mayors of the villages also supported the project. As a result of the project, all trainees took their exams and enrolled in higher grades. Several people dropped out of the courses owing to external causes, such as family relocation or illness.

Mayors of towns and villages and school principals from all settlements sent letters of thanks to the ‘Diversity’ Balkan Foundation and requested at least a two-year

extension of the project. The team of the 'Diversity' BFCCEU regularly supervised project implementation and provided scientific and methodological assistance and financial control over expenses. They periodically received information about the examination results.

The Balkan Foundation envisioned that the project would continue for another two years and that all trainees would receive a school degree. During the 2000–2001 academic year, the trainees attended training courses in food services, bar-tending, cooking, hairdressing, manicure, pedicure, tailoring, driving, operating agricultural machines, bricklaying, etc. Thus, new employment opportunities were provided for those young people.

Most Roma who are unemployed cannot find jobs because of the very low level of education they have completed. The aim has been to enable the trainees to continue their education, be it elementary or secondary. Thus, young Roma people were given the opportunity to find work, escape their poverty and isolation, exercise their rights and integrate into society. The training involved the following activities:

- forming groups of young Roma (according to their educational level) to be prepared by teachers to take their exams;
- providing the support of the Ministry of Education and Science, regional inspectorates and municipalities in order to encourage young people to study;
- offering young people training courses in the field of agriculture, economics and crafts traditionally practiced by ethnic groups and the majority;
- involving Labour Offices, which will employ those trainees who have successfully completed the respective courses; and
- providing support for establishing self-run small enterprises.

The 'Diversity' Balkan Foundation also sponsored a 'Summer school on Romani language and culture' for Roma students studying various subjects at different Bulgarian universities. For three years, the summer school created a community of young Roma interested in studying Romani language, history and culture, and students who were practically assimilated. Many of these individuals were previously ashamed of their Roma identity and hid their ethnic background from their professors and colleagues at universities. Owing to the success of the summer schools, the University of Veliko Tarnovo opened a new programme entitled 'Primary school education and Romani language', which prepares elementary school teachers in all subjects and particularly to teach the Romani language. The programme has existed since 2003 and enrolls 65 students from all over the country. This is perhaps the most successful Roma project in Bulgaria, because it helps create a new generation of Roma intellectuals.

Conclusions

The education of Roma students in Bulgaria is a new issue, which became important during the years of transition when Bulgaria changed from a communist to a

democratic society. The challenges of Roma education relate to changes in societal attitudes towards the bilingualism of Roma children and respect for their cultural differences. In kindergarten and primary grades, mother-tongue education plays an important role in education. However, this area remains underdeveloped. As a result, scholars, teachers, Roma activists and Roma parents have expressed negative attitudes towards Romani language education. Bulgarian society does not believe that Romani language is a tool for the cognitive development of Roma children, particularly in the very early years.

The bussing project to accomplish desegregation is a positive model but there are still many things to be done in society with both Roma and Bulgarian parents, so that the process can become successful. Roma NGOs in particular must change their strategies and look at the desegregation process not only as an human rights issue, but also as an educational concern.

The projects targeting adult education and literacy must be more community based and society supported. It is not enough to be hopeful that individuals will receive a higher education, but rather it has to be a community action. This community involvement needs to have the support of society as a whole—from the schools to the municipality and the social affair offices. Only in this way can the project be sustained.

All the projects described above are positive models of successful action in different Roma communities involving Roma children from diverse educational levels but, to date, remain difficult to sustain owing to the fact that most have not been adopted at the institutional level and have remained initiatives by individuals and Roma NGOs.

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