

Transformative education for Roma (Gypsy) children: an insider's view

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ABSTRACT *In this article I take a close look at the educational situation of Roma children and especially at the impediments that exist regarding their full participation in the educational process. At the present time the bilingualism of Roma children is either ignored or seen as a handicap. There is little appreciation in mainstream education of Roma culture or the Romani language. The challenge for educators everywhere is to adapt one's teaching methods and the curriculum in such a way that school becomes more interesting for Roma children, and also that majority students and teachers become more familiar with Roma culture and history. We suggest several ways to accomplish this.*

Introduction

Article 3.1 of the United Nations *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (E 793, 1948) states that "Prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools, or the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group" is *Linguistic Genocide* (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Skutnabb-Kangas notes that:

Linguistic genocide as defined by the UN is practiced throughout the world. The use of indigenous or minority language can be prohibited overtly and directly, through laws, imprisonment, torture, killing and threats. (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1998)

Irrespective of where they live in today's world, the Roma (Gypsies) tend to be bilingual. In addition to Romani (an Indian related language), which is their mother tongue, they also speak the official language of the country in which they live and often some of the languages of neighboring countries. At school, the bilingualism of Roma children is not viewed as an advantage, but instead as a handicap. A major reason for this is that the status of the Romani language is still very low throughout the world.

A cursory glance at world history shows us that during the Middle Ages the Roma were oppressed by the Catholic Church because they were speakers of a language that nobody knew—Roma people were often arrested or deported, or accused of heresy (violating church practice) and burned at the stake. The Roma were forbidden to use their own language and in some places if someone was caught speaking Romani his/her tongue would be cut off. During this period in time children would

be taken from their families and sent to homes or institutions where they would be kept from learning their own language and culture.

Persecution continued from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries for most of the European Roma. In Hungary, Queen Maria Teresa forced them to change their names in addition to forbidding the use of the Romani language. Cutting off one's tongue if the Romani language was spoken was commonplace at that time in Spain and Finland.

Some of these practices continued into the twentieth century. During the communist period the use of Romani was officially forbidden in some CEE countries, for example in Bulgaria. Those who spoke Romani or other minority languages in public were subsequently punished. There were written signs in public places (e.g. restaurants, buses) proclaiming that the "the use of minority languages in public places is absolutely prohibited". In fact, the names of Muslims and Roma were forcibly changed and children at school were made to feel ashamed of being Roma or a member of another minority group. They were also made to feel ashamed of using their mother tongues.

The situation was no different in educational institutions. Schools did not help Roma children but instead made their lives very difficult and complicated by forbidding the use of Romani during classes or among the children during recess.

The Current Status of the Roma and the Romani Language

After the democratization of CEE societies in the 1990s the educational situation changed for Roma communities. The problems facing these communities were not solved but instead exacerbated. Many Roma children dropped out of, or never even started school. The reasons for this are complex and this paper attempts to provide an explanation of these reasons from a Roma perspective.

During the last decade many Roma families have become jobless, and the economic situation of most Roma has deteriorated further and further. Families cannot afford to pay the fees for kindergarten; to buy books and clothes, or to provide their children with the financial support needed to lead a full and normal school life.

On the other hand, it is known that traditional Roma education is a community-based education. Children learn to understand and read the verbal and non-verbal communication signals of adults in their community at a much earlier age than their non-Roma counterparts. They participate in the community's day to day activities and it is here where they learn by watching and listening, by observing the economic, social, linguistic, political and moral codes of their society. Children will quickly learn the first words of the country's official language in this community environment.

When they start their formal schooling the Roma child arrives in a non-Roma world where knowledge about life and society is presented in a totally different way. Roma children usually have difficulties *adapting* to the educational processes that characterize a typical classroom. The teachers expect Roma children to know how to cope with the school rules. Quite frequently Roma children do not meet the

expectations of the teachers and then the “conflict” situation is easily solved—by placing the children’s desks at the back of the classroom, or sending them to schools for retarded or physically challenged children. It is a common pattern for teachers and non-Roma students to refrain from communicating with Roma children because they are “dirty”. The Roma children in the back of the room too often also lack textbooks and other resource materials needed for classroom activities. From a Roma child’s perspective school life is boring and classroom activities are not interesting. Teachers rarely realize that Roma children have much more knowledge about life than some of the other students and that their interests are connected to everyday life.

The process of education should not be a one-sided process. There are steps that can be taken, however, which can ensure the success of all students. If we accept the above-mentioned premise that positive change is possible then the challenge for educators is to involve Roma children to a greater extent in the educational process by making it more interesting and productive for them.

Transformative Education

Paulo Freire (1982a, 1982b) introduced the term “transformative education” to describe an educational approach that involves the reconstruction of social reality through meaningful dialogue between teachers and students. Alma Flor Ada (1986) refers to “transformative education” as creative education and notes the following:

Through creative education, students learn to understand and appreciate themselves, to use that understanding as a means of valuing the diversity of others, to reflect critically upon their experiences so that can be a source of growth, and to respond creatively to the world around them. If bilingual students are to have an opportunity to validate their own language and culture acknowledging both the difficulties faced by their ethnic groups and the possibilities open to them effecting change and for making positive contributions to society—they must be participants in creative education. Only then will the students and teachers be able to reclaim bilingualism as an asset for both individuals and society. (p. 388)

In the 1990s the Romani language and culture were introduced into the curriculum of certain schools in various CEE countries. Mostly it has been the Ministries of Education that have taken the initiative. In some cases it has been non-profit organizations (NGOs) and Human Rights organizations that have taken the initiative to develop educational programs. Various textbooks in the Romani language have been produced and teacher-training courses have been organized to facilitate this process.

There are several reasons for introducing Romani as a mother tongue language into schools. A first reason was to make the *educational process more interesting and attractive for Roma children*. However, the Romani language and culture have not been introduced to majority children. We encounter Romani language and culture in segregated schools, which tend to be located in ghetto environments. As a

consequence, most majority children still do not know anything about the Romani language, culture or history. If we look at the mainstream curriculum we readily see why this is the case:

- nothing is written about the Roma and their history in history textbooks;
- nothing is written about the Roma and their influence on world music and culture in music textbooks;
- nothing is written about Roma writers and the influence of Roma on world literature in literature textbooks.

In short, the Roma and their culture are invisible in the textbooks that the majority of children read. The contributions of the Roma and the diversity they bring to society are still not celebrated in mainstream schools, and there is no constructive dialogue among teachers and the non-Roma students regarding the Roma.

A second reason for introducing Romani into schools was *political* and related to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was signed in 1989. Most CEE nations are members of International organizations such as the UN, the Council of Europe, and the European Commission. The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to receive education in his or her own mother tongue and the State is required to provide assistance in making this possible. CEE countries signed this document. Some nations started to consequently introduce the Roma language in certain schools but halted these activities after a few years. The official reasons for doing this were that “the children do not want to learn the Romani language and culture”.

Our observations point to something different. In fact, to us it is clear that the lack of knowledge regarding how to organize the bilingual education of Roma children produced negative results. Instead of using the mother tongue as a point of departure for bilingual education, the Ministries of Education usually used the official majority language as a tool for mother tongue teaching. When the results of the experiment turned out to be negative the Ministries of Education simply discontinued the bilingual education for Roma children altogether.

A third reason for introducing mother tongue education was based on *scientific evidence*. Researchers have found that second language acquisition by bilingual children depends on the level of development of their mother tongue (see, e.g. Cummins, 1981). However, the scientific approach was not respected enough in discussions and met with a negative reaction from the majority of non-Roma. In some countries (for example in Bulgaria) the majority population protested (including the teachers) against introducing the Romani language into the school curriculum.

In most CEE countries Roma children learn a second language using the same textbooks as the majority children. The expectations are that all children start with the same level of knowledge and need to go through the same processes to achieve the same results. Most Ministries of Education in Central and Eastern Europe are still very much opposed to producing alternative textbooks for Roma children in which the official language is introduced as a second language. In a bilingual Roma

classroom the methods and approaches to education have to be different than the methods and approaches used in a monolingual non-Roma classroom. Krashen (1996) has commented that the knowledge gained through one's first language makes second language (SL) input more comprehensible. Furthermore, literacy gained through the first language transfers to a second language. Various researchers in Central and Eastern Europe have been working on this problem, as well, and there have been some encouraging results in the region (for instance in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia). It has been demonstrated that interactive methods, used in combination with art, language games, music and drama are very effective vehicles for learning among Roma children.

Children dropping out of school in CEE countries is a new phenomenon. The educational systems in these countries have not developed mechanisms for the education of children outside the school. Most of the dropouts in CEE countries are Roma children. The main reasons for the high drop out rate among the Roma are the following.

1. The economic situation of Roma families.
2. The educational system and its lack of flexibility.

Many non-profit organizations (NGOs) are presently developing educational projects for dropouts. However, there have not been thorough evaluations regarding the effectiveness of these projects, especially since there have been few if any evaluations in general of educational projects for Roma in Central and Eastern Europe.

Another main problem facing CEE countries is the training of the teachers who work with Roma children. In most countries, the teacher training colleges and the Universities do not produce Roma bilingual teachers. At the moment there is only one such University, in Nitra-Slovakia. Recently, the Ministry of Education of Romania also started a program for Roma bilingual teachers (to my knowledge there are no Roma teacher assistants in West European or North American classrooms). It is safe to say that teachers belonging to the majority do not have sufficient knowledge and preparation to work optimally with Roma children. It has been mainly NGOs and Foundations that have organized teacher training seminars and introduced alternative methods for the education of Roma children.

How Should Roma Education be Organized?

The problems with Roma schooling may be summarized as follows.

1. Adaptation and integration of Roma children into mainstream schools and community involvement in the educational process. To accomplish this "special schools", segregated schools and separate classes have to be closed down.
2. Interactive methods are needed when introducing Romani as a mother tongue and the official language as a second language to Roma. Bilingual Roma teachers and Roma teacher assistants need to be introduced into both segregated and mainstream classes. Non-Roma teachers working with Roma children need to

receive anti-bias education in order for them to overcome their existing prejudices and racism.

3. New approaches are needed for the education of dropouts. Such approaches need to be more community oriented and closer to the cultural values of Roma.

Psychologists have described the adaptation process of Roma children to formal schooling as an especially stressful process. The participation of parents and the presence of a Roma bilingual teacher or assistant teacher will ameliorate the adaptation process of the child. The families also play another role. They are a source of knowledge, which is unfortunately not appreciated in Central and Eastern Europe. Ada & Smith (1998) comment that “certain types of knowledge are systematically devalued by schools” (p. 47). They continue by commenting that it is especially the kind of knowledge that comes from one’s experiences in life that are devalued. Introducing the stories of parents (e.g. from their childhood) into the classroom can be an important source for discussing the history of Roma, as well as their cultural and traditional values.

Majority children and majority teachers have to start the process of appreciating the bilingualism that Roma pupils bring with them. This will benefit not only the Roma communities but all of society. When the majority (finally) starts to appreciate the Romani language and Romani bilingualism in all its richness then a transformation of society will take place. In the USA examples exist of schools that have immersion programs for majority children. An immersion program is a program in which linguistic majority children with a high-status mother tongue voluntarily choose (among existing alternatives) to be instructed (at least partially) through the medium of a foreign (minority) language. In this way the minority language and culture are given the same status as the dominant one. Within the CEE context this would mean that majority children and teachers (Bulgarian, Romanian, Czech, Hungarian, Slovak, etc.) would learn the Romani language. By focusing on multiple domains (political, cultural, social, etc.) we can start to change the prevailing negative attitudes towards certain groups (in this case the Roma). Teachers need to be trained and sensitized to the language and culture of Roma, and the curriculum in schools has to treat different cultures with the same respect.

The dropouts and street children of Central and Eastern Europe are mainly Roma and they need better educational opportunities. In CEE countries the only education that has any status is the education received in the regular school system. There are no other alternatives for education for those who drop out of school at an early age. A community oriented educational approach with high levels of community involvement can help dropouts receive a valuable education. However, for this to happen, a new type of education which allows dropouts and street children to participate needs to be developed. We can find examples of successful programs of this nature around the world, for instance in countries like India, Brazil, and Argentina. These can serve as a model for Central and Eastern Europe.

Conclusions

In conclusion I would like to say that in order to change the status of Roma children and the Romani language in the educational system a lot of work still has to be done. There is a need for extensive research in all those countries where we find a Roma population. There is also a need to develop textbooks with Roma content for both Roma and non-Roma children. In this manner children can gain a much better understanding of Roma history, culture and traditions and they can start to appreciate this culture more. The Romani language, as a mother tongue for Roma children and a second language for non-Roma children and teachers should be introduced as a subject in schools. In her earlier work, Skutnabb-Kangas (1979) pointed out the importance of mother tongue education for second language acquisition. In her research, focusing on Finnish minority children in Swedish schools, Skutnabb-Kangas showed that Finnish children who learn Swedish by means of their mother tongue achieve much more academically than Finnish children who learn Swedish only.

In order to improve the educational situation of Roma in Europe some larger changes at the societal level need to occur. Majority attitudes towards the Roma are extremely negative throughout the continent at the moment. The educational chances of Roma will not radically improve until these attitudes change and the Roma are treated as human beings with equal human rights, and when their history, culture and language are appreciated. Changes in the educational system will truly start when the bilingualism of the Roma child is acknowledged and appreciated, and when non-Roma children and non-Roma teachers start to learn Romani as a valuable language. The result would be the transformation of societies towards being more humanistic (and less oppressive). In such a society all people would be respected and appreciated, irrespective of their ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences.

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