

Programmes of Supporting the Educational Needs of Romani Pupils in the Czech Republic

Lenka Gulová / e-mail: gulova@ped.muni.cz;

Stanislav Střelec / email: strelec@ped.muni.cz

Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

Gulová, L. – Střelec, S. (2016). Programmes of Supporting the Educational Needs of Romani People in the Czech Republic. *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 8/1, 125–135.

This study presents relevant information collected during practical work and research findings related to forms of work with children, young people and adult members of the Romani ethnic group focusing on improving their educational attainment. The paper reflects selected findings obtained during the work of the Centre of Multicultural Education at the Department of Social Education at the Faculty of Education of Masaryk University in Brno over a period of more than ten years.

Key words: the Romani ethnic group; social segregation; social integration; research findings; educational support programmes; active remedial teaching, teacher's assistant

General basis of the issue

The Romani people, of whom there are almost twelve million living in Europe, belong to an ethnic group that bears the brunt of all the consequences of segregation from majority society. There are also specific manifestations of the segregation of the Romani people in the Czech Republic, taking in a wide spectrum of phenomena such as brutal attacks with a racial subtext, the creation of modern-day ghettos, various manifestations of professional discrimination and the superficial presentation of the Romani issue in the media. Efforts are, however, also being made to search for the causes of these phenomena and, by extension, solutions to this bleak situation. The focus of this study is not to put forward a description or discourse relating to the complex interdisciplinary aspects of this process. This is a matter for researchers in a large number of fields such as sociologists, political scientists, ethnographers, economists and other specialists. Some of the current research findings provide us with support in the realisation of

programmes aimed at promoting educational attainment among the Romani ethnic group.¹

One of the principal reasons for the bleak position facing the Romani people in the hierarchy of social relations is their low educational attainment. Educational attainment is, meanwhile, an essential condition to career opportunities; having an occupation is a source of economic security for the individual and his or her family, etc. These indisputable facts are also a general starting point for our efforts to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of the Romani people's access to education. One of these barriers is the low standing of education in the hierarchy of values of a not insignificant number of Romani families. This is indicated in a number of investigations.² This handicap, in connection with other factors of a bleak socio-economic nature, is one of the causes (and consequences) of a "vicious circle" leading to the undesirable position of "maladjusted" Romani people.

At the pan-European conference held in Bratislava in 2008 devoted to issues in the education of the Romani ethnic group,³ a critical voice was raised towards Europe's government structures calling on them to take responsibility for improving the Romani people's complicated educational situation. Efforts to resolve this situation are, indeed, often made with the initiation of expensive projects, though without significant long-term strategies or long-term effects. The principal agencies on the path from social segregation to the integration of the Romani into majority society thus are only more or less isolated groups and individual institutions engaged in such work. One example of efforts made over the longer term and based on programme continuity and an institutional foundation is the initiative of the Department of Social Education at the Faculty of Education of Masaryk University in Brno which culminated in the establishment of the Centre of Multicultural Education. In the year 2002, the centre began preparing and implementing programmes aimed at meeting the needs of Romani pupils. Now, when the centre has been operating for more than

¹ See, for example, Klenková, J., Vítková, M. (Eds). (2008). *Vzdělávání žáků s narušenou komunikační schopností. Vzdělávání žáků se speciálními vzdělávacími potřebami*. Anthology from an international conference. Brno: Paido; Němec, J., Vojtová, V. et al. (2009). *Vzdělávání žáků se sociálním znevýhodněním*. Brno: Paido, MU.

² See, for example, Gulová, L. et al. (2010). *Analýza vzdělávacích potřeb romských žáků*. Brno: Masaryk University; Štěpařová, E. (2009). *Sociálně-pedagogické faktory ovlivňující edukaci romských dětí*: Dissertation. Brno: Masaryk University; Němec, J. et al. (2010). *Edukace romských žáků v zrcadle výzkumných šetření*. Brno: Masaryk University.

³ *Conférence européenne sur l'éducation de Roms*, 8–9 April 2008. Bratislava.

ten years, is a good time to take stock of this work against the background of research and factographic data on multidirectional forms of work with children, young people and adult members of the Romani ethnic group. It must be stated that the Department of Social Education (and with it the Centre of Multicultural Education) at the Faculty of Education of Masaryk University has, in recent years, found methodological and, perhaps most importantly, financial support in the shape of projects from the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic, European Union structural funds and the Operational Programmes Education for Competitiveness. The majority of these programmes are not intended exclusively for the Romani population, though there has been certain development in this area. A few years ago programmes were conceived as grant programmes for the integration of the Romani community and migrant foreigners into majority society; such programmes are now identified as support programmes for socially disadvantaged children, pupils and students. We also present here a selection of the most momentous of these programmes and those with which the centre has had the most experience. The following brief characteristics also include expert conclusions and recommendations based on both experience and the research having been conducted.

The teacher's assistant

The Centre of Multicultural Education at the Department of Social Education at the Faculty of Education of Masaryk University held Teacher's Assistant Courses from 2000 to 2009. These courses were part of the Life-long Education Programme at Masaryk University and were later extended from six months to one year (two semesters). The course participants received 408 hours of instruction in the form of compulsory seminars, lectures, exercises and practical experience at schools and other institutions. The aim was to prepare the students for the demands of teaching children and young people in the conditions found at schools and other institutions. The course participants gained basic knowledge in the areas of education and psychology to better understand the structure and peculiarities of child personality and to focus their teaching efforts accordingly. The students also acquired a number of skills in practical teaching, including a methodology for preparing activities at school and in the family. Emphasis was also placed on the issue of homework in relation to Romani pupils, teaching preparation and methods of co-operation between the school and the family, etc. An important part of the course consisted of visits to institutions working with children and young

people (e.g. The Museum of Romani Culture, The Romani Society in Moravia, The Romani Centre DROM and selected primary schools in Brno).

The course finished with a final exam in pedagogy and psychology and successful participants received a certificate of graduation from the programme. Over the course of nine years, 142 assistants of Romani origin from all over the country successfully completed the teacher's assistant course, the majority of whom now work at primary schools and in pre-school preparatory classes. Other course graduates have found work in social services; a number of them have completed the necessary secondary school and university education over the course of time and now work for various authorities and not-for-profit organisations in the social sphere.

Teacher's assistants may, according to the existing legislative regulations,⁴ work in schools and in preparatory classes where they help pupils with specific educational needs. They try to create "bridges of communication" between teachers on one side and pupils and parents on the other. A teacher's assistant should act as a mediator of comprehension between the majority culture and minority culture and acquaint both groups with the values, rules of behaviour and peculiarities of communication of the other. Their role is also to prepare opportunities for bringing the Romani community and the school closer together.

Teacher's assistants frequently state that playing the role of mediator between the teacher and a Romani pupil is extremely mentally demanding for them, though they try to meet their obligations and maintain their loyalty with respect to the teachers. Below is an opinion of one of the assistants:

"The presence of an assistant at the school has a calming effect on a large number of children... The assistant represents a great promise that a child will continue to attend primary school with success, particularly for children starting year one whose Czech is extremely poor. Communicating in the Czech language can cause the children considerable problems at the beginning, for which reason the chance of using the Romani language can be extremely helpful until they get used to the Czech language and learn to use it actively. Another important point is the fact that the children feel that the assistant understands them better as they come from the same background. The

⁴ Act 561/2004 Sb., Section 16, para. 9 and Ministry of Education Decree 73, Section 7 (teacher's assistant). See The Decree on the Education of Children, Pupils and Students with Special Educational Needs and Especially Talented Children, Pupils and Students.

same goes for the children's parents, who often know the assistant from elsewhere than the school environment. If problems do occur, the parents know that the assistant is not unfamiliar with their environment and that they do not need to enter into any complicated explanations. They are also confident that the assistant will stand up for the children in school and will let the parents know in good time if any serious problems arise."⁵

The teacher's assistant has an invaluable role to play in teaching and presentation of new material, and works with the pupils on an individual basis right in the classroom. There may, for example, be many terms and concepts that Romani children do not understand and they may sometimes not understand what is meant or are unfamiliar with new words. The teacher's assistant's task is to explain such terms clearly and, where possible, to convey them intuitively in a way that the children can understand. In this context, the assistant plays the role of "interpreter". His or her role is, however, often much wider in scope and is not restricted merely to the mediation of schoolwork, but also takes in pupil motivation as well.

Romani teacher's assistants working in schools with large numbers of Romani pupils represent a highly specific group in that they may not have the kind of education that teachers have but their intuitive and sensitive approach to the pupils and their learning difficulties enable them to create strategies of education and mediation that help Romani pupils get an education and live with the other children in the class in a natural symbiosis. A teacher's assistant from the Romani community generally knows the parents of the children at the school and can naturally avoid the kind of problems that generally accompany the adaptation of Romani pupils to systematic education.

Teacher's assistants are also becoming increasingly aware of the need for their own further education. Since 2010, the team at the Department of Social Education has been concentrating on further education for teacher's assistants. A number of courses providing targeted support for co-operation between teacher's assistants and teachers have been opened within the framework of projects aimed at improving the study prospects of children from socially disadvantaged environments.

⁵ Pompa, A. (2005). *Asistent pedagoga pro děti ze sociokulturně znevýhodňujícího prostředí, jeho funkce ve škole*. Bachelor thesis. Brno: Department of Social Education, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, pp. 45–46.

A programme of active remedial tutoring for Romani children in their family

Another programme aimed at socially disadvantaged children is active remedial tutoring in the family. This programme has been operated by the Faculty of Teaching of Masaryk University for almost fifteen years. It began with a small group of volunteers among the faculty's students who went to Romani families to work with school pupils. The programme developed over the years thanks to the interest seen from parents, schools, social workers and (most importantly) the faculty's students into an entire system run with sophisticated coordination in which as many as three hundred university students provide active remedial tutoring to more than three hundred Romani schoolchildren at home and, to no small extent, in schools and drop-in centres. Children faced with difficult living conditions (for example children living in shelters, children from homes with more than one family living in a single apartment) are taught outside their home. The whole programme is coordinated by one pedagogy specialist from the Department of Social Education who connects families with students and communicates with parents, schools, social workers and staff in the not-for-profit sector, etc. This coordination is conducted in part with the use of e-mail, Facebook and an e-learning course. Another member of staff at the department is responsible for administrative work.

The faculty's students can provide remedial tutoring within the framework of the project or as an optional subject. In view of the enormous interest seen from the students, the team at the Department of Social Education also tries to integrate this interesting work experience into compulsory subjects for trainee teachers. Active remedial teaching has a number of rules that must be obeyed by the family, the student and the school. The tutor communicates with the teacher of the pupil whom he or she is tutoring.

Communicating with tutors and parents using a closed Facebook group, currently visited by 324 participants, has recently proved extremely successful. The group is made up by the students providing remedial tutoring, the schoolchildren they teach and their parents. Sometimes the parents themselves write requests for help teaching their children, while the students share useful advice and post interesting suggestions for events of various kinds, conferences, seminars, educational portals, teaching aids, etc. Most importantly, the group provides extremely rapid communication between the programme's organiser, students and parents with the option of rapid feedback.

This is an important programme for the students (tutors) taking part. They get the chance of experiencing for themselves the environment in

which socially disadvantaged families live and Romani culture, can try out and master new approaches to teaching Romani children, re-evaluate their opinions and build a relationship with and respect to the Romani community. These remedial teachers hand in a written account of their teaching each semester to the programme supervisor, while the summary results of regular evaluations and supervision are also made available to them.

Preparing adults for further studies

The supplementary education programmes also include a preliminary year preparing the adult population for further education. This programme has also been running for more than ten years now, during which time more than a hundred and fifty Romani people interested in studying have applied to take part. More than a hundred of them have been accepted to study social education, and forty-six successfully completed their bachelor or master's studies. One graduate has received a Ph.D., works at Ostrava University and is now preparing for a higher doctorate. At the present time, ten of these students are studying social education. We currently have twenty students in the preliminary preparatory course, of which some are Romani and others are students from other ethnic groups.

Support programmes focusing on the Czech language, mathematics, the English language and computer literacy

In past years, short-term courses have also been opened focusing on the Czech language, mathematics, the English language and computer literacy. These were one-semester courses and were attended by ten to fifteen participants. There is currently no interest in these support programmes. This is, to an extent, evidence of the fact that the situation regarding access to education for the Romani population is gradually changing and those with a serious interest in studying are now regular students at secondary schools and universities.

The Romani language and Romani studies as part of education for teachers

A useful supplement to the above mentioned programmes comes in the form of teaching of the Romani language and Romani studies that is seeing great popularity among students at Masaryk University as a whole.

This programme has also been running for more than ten years, and there has been increasing interest in Romani studies and the Romani language recently. This includes both students who are actively engaged in remedial tutoring and those taking combined forms of study who are working as social workers or teachers and whose work focuses on the Romani population. Courses in the Romani language and the basics of Romani studies have been opened under the leadership of experienced instructors, including both Romani people and instructors from majority society. In this regard, we take advantage of co-operation with the Museum of Romani Culture and other organisations. These courses are currently designed as optional subjects, and attract more applicants than we can accept. More than seventy students have taken the Romani language and almost twenty students have taken Romani studies.

A few notes in conclusion

We can state that systematic work over a number of years with relatively large groups of Romani people in the university environment has resulted in certain changes in every one of us, and particularly to our prejudices and deep-rooted ideas about the Romani people as difficult people who cannot be educated. Our new positive knowledge has enriched not only those of us who take part in these programmes as university teachers. It has also led to changes in the attitudes held by the university students involved who have gradually come to realise during the course of their educational activities that the situation among the Romani ethnic group is not so unambiguous as it is depicted in the media, for example, but takes in a complex range of problems, and that educational support programmes are just one way (though an extremely important way) of effecting long-term change.

The tempting vision of an increasing number of educated members of the Romani ethnic group playing a part in this process is one that is justified, though still rather remote. At the present time, the Romani people need our sympathy and co-operation. What cannot be doubted, however, is the fact that education is the most important element leading to positive change in the lives of the Romani people in respect to their prospects in life and career opportunities. Francis Bacon's famous adage that "knowledge is power"⁶, which implies that those who do not have information and knowledge cannot generally take part in society's

⁶ The distinguished English philosopher, scientist, historian and politician Francis Bacon (1561–1626), founder of empiricism and originator of new scientific methods.

decision-making processes and cannot, therefore, influence events that would benefit them, still applies to the entire population.

In spite of all the positive trends, the process of integrating the Romani people into majority society is progressing slowly. This process cannot, of course, be halted, but it is sometimes slowed down by the barrier of xenophobia that is encountered in everyday situations. There are still cases of modern-day migration of Romani people, some of whom seem to have ceased believing in the democratic principles of society, for example the slow, but continuing, migration of Romani people to countries that provide more succinct guarantees of an atmosphere of tolerance and the observance of human rights. Many of these Czech Roma requesting asylum testify to the fact that it is far from simple to live in a country, i.e. the Czech Republic, where people hold onto their belongings more tightly when you get on the tram, where people take a sceptical approach to your child's education, and where employers won't hire you because they don't trust you because of the colour of your skin. It is important, therefore, to accompany every programme of integration with multicultural education that works with the majority population, raises the issue of tolerance and stands up against the intolerance that deepens prejudice and xenophobia and fuels racist tendencies among both extremists and the silent majority.

Romani children and children from other cultures can be expected to have the same potential as children from majority society. Their handicaps lie in social disadvantages that are further aggravated by a lack of awareness of the Romani culture, language, ethnolect, etc. among majority society. In the last few years, the situation has been turning in favour of Romani children who now have a greater chance of education in mainstream education which is a significant precondition to further study. People being socially disadvantaged can, of course, be reflected in their chance of study success, though we believe that the path towards inclusion is a far more significant mechanism than the exclusion that leads to Romani children being put into special schools.⁷

Multicultural dialogue opens up a number of topics, some of which are merely the subject of long discussion, while others are already bringing specific results. A hopeful step in this direction is the initiative from the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic introducing programmes of Ethics in Schools – multicultural teaching aimed at preventing

⁷ Gulová, L. (2010). *Integrace a segregace v závěrečné reflexi*. In Němec, J. et al. *Edukace romských žáků v zrcadle výzkumných šetření*. Brno: Masaryk University, pp. 114–117.

homophobia and extremism in schools, etc. The research results we refer to in this study give an indication of just how difficult the situation is for the Romani population in the Czech Republic. The Romani population itself certainly contributes to many of these problems. Romani parents do not devote sufficient attention to the education and prospects of their children. These children lack a stimulating environment and the educational support. On the other hand, many Roma have to overcome barriers connected with society's prejudices and xenophobia. Such situations can have an extremely negative effect on majority society, though first and foremost on the Romani people themselves as it has the effect of discouraging them from attempting to improve their life prospects.

Quite evident efforts at inclusion and support are being made in the area of education. Over the last ten years or more, developments have been seen here in the perception of Romani pupils and their needs. Disciplines aiming to level the playing field for the socially disadvantaged, such as social education, social work, special education, multicultural education, etc., have been developed. What more can be suggested in the context of these facts? The following suggestions are clear to individuals and groups engaged in educating socially disadvantaged groups, though we mention them nevertheless:

- The creation of a comprehensive conception for education of socially disadvantaged groups; support for the profession of teacher's assistant, reinforcing the position of teacher's assistants in the school environment and enabling their further education by supporting organisations that can provide such education.
- Support for education for children and adolescents from socially disadvantaged environments accompanied by support for education for the adult Romani population.
- Continued development of early care with, for example, pre-school preparatory classes.
- Support for the creation of new professions in the school environment, in particular the professions social educator and free-time and social education worker which can be of enormous importance in activating social disadvantaged groups.
- Support for the development of multicultural education in schools.
- Enabling education for present and future teachers in the area of multicultural education and Romani studies. Working to overcome the prejudices of teachers and social workers.
- Protecting minorities against the consequences of discrimination, segregation and xenophobia.

- Working more actively with majority society through, for example, the media, presentations of good practice, etc.

Many of these proposals require considerable financial means, but it is certainly worth for society to invest in prevention rather than to pay the financial cost of the impacts of social pathology affecting socially disadvantaged groups, including the Romani population. It is extremely important for the Romani people themselves to become more engaged in decision-making processes in the position of experts in various areas with the support of majority society.