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School and Roma Children in Serbia: A Gap that Should Be Bridged²

Extended summary

Social inclusion of Roma population and the improvement of its socio-economic position are among the priorities of the Republic of Serbia. However, the reports dealing with the educational inclusion of Roma children provide some alarming data. Apart from irregular attendance and leaving school altogether, a poor achievement of these children is also apparent (Roma Inclusion Index, 2015; Equal access to quality education for the Roma in Serbia, 2007).

The goal of this research is to determine the factors impeding the successful teaching and learning of Roma children in the Serbian education system and to identify the difficulties faced by these children and their teachers.

According to the theory put forward by the romologists, experts dealing with the education of Roma children (Liégeois, 1997, 2007; Reyners, 2003; Meunier, 2007), cultural differences and conflicting relationships are thought to be possible causes of some difficulties that Roma pupils and their teachers are facing. However, we believe that one should be cautious regarding alterity because it can easily result in a culturalistic interpretation (Abdallah-Preteille, 2011). The roots of the problems are quite often found beyond cultural differences.

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The research was conducted in a primary school in Belgrade where 90% of pupils are from Roma population. Collecting observations about teachers, pupils, and the school itself, enabled us to get an insight into the perceptions about the nature of the relationships in the school as well as the difficulties arising from them. In order to accomplish our goal, we opted for the method of conducting different types of interviews. Unstructured interviews were conducted with subject teachers and teachers in the lower grades of primary school, two group interviews were conducted with pupils, and one semi-structured interview was conducted with the school principal. This paper focuses on the interviews with subject teachers and teachers in the lower grades of primary school. Drawing upon the practice of some authors (Duchesne, 2000), we formulated the following question – Would you like to talk with us about your pupils? This type of interview made possible for the participants to give their observations spontaneously and indirectly.

The results obtained via an interpretative analysis of the teachers' observations about their pupils indicate that there is a complex situation the components of which are interrelated. Accordingly, a poor school achievement and a low motivation for learning among the Roma pupils are the key problems. On one hand, these problems are caused by the lack of interest of the Roma parents and children in education, and their poor mastery of the Serbian Language, on the other. The parents' lack of interest in what their children have learnt is partly the result of their own lack of education, but also of the distanced relationship between the parents and the school. Consequently, this situation directly results in the pupils' avoidance of the obligations outside of the school and their slow improvement. In addition, this aspect of the problem also entails the lack of motivation and the insufficient commitment of subject teachers and teachers in the lower grades of primary school to their work with these pupils. The interviews have also shown that teachers have negative and stigmatised perceptions of the Roma children, which is yet another component of the problems and difficulties encountered by the pupils in the school.

Based on the analysis of the obtained research results, we propose a solution that could eliminate the problems of the Roma pupils and their teachers in the Serbian education system: a deconstruction of the negative and stigmatised perceptions of the Roma pupils and their parents, initiating cooperation between these parents and the school, as well as developing a programme of language support for Roma children in the form of Serbian Language lessons in which their mother tongue, the Roma language, would also be included.

Keywords: Roma pupils in Serbia, education, problems, difficulties.

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