



## National Viability Strategy

### Context

Many Roma in Ireland face socio-economic difficulties which act as barriers to accessing and engaging in education. Lack of access to employment and social welfare protection, particularly child benefit and the back to school allowance, are the main obstacles. Many Roma in Ireland do not qualify for Habitual Residence Condition- a social welfare restriction which determines access to social payments.<sup>1</sup> As a result of limited or no income many Roma families struggle to send their children to school. Although schooling in Ireland is free there are additional costs such as school uniforms, books and lunches. Some schools are known to help Roma who cannot afford to purchase the necessary items- provided they are in the position to do so.

Educational practitioners report substandard housing conditions to be the main issue affecting Roma children's poor attendance rates as families may be forced to move from place to place due to poor living conditions. This makes it difficult for educational practitioners to keep track of children's whereabouts and educational records.

Language and literacy skills and engaging with Roma parents were also raised as significant barriers. The overwhelming majority of Roma adults and children in Ireland are estimated to have limited or no literacy and English language skills. Some Roma children have never been to school before. In these cases particularly older children are difficult to integrate

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<sup>1</sup> See Pavee Point's position paper on Habitual Residence Condition- Pavee Point (2011) *Impact of the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC) on Travellers and Roma*. [online] Dublin: Pavee Point, Available from: <http://paveepoint.ie/2011/08/position-paper-on-the-habitual-residence-condition/> [Accessed 28/1/2013].

into the school system. Parents who haven't gone to school themselves can have lower expectations in terms of their children's education. This can affect the rates of early school leaving and educational achievement due to lack of support at home. In trying to ensure higher attendance and completion rates among Roma students, educational practitioners can often struggle to engage with Roma parents.

### **Lack of a National Framework**

In the committee's view the main challenge is the complete lack of framework from which to work towards Roma inclusion in the education system. This situation is often exacerbated by issues of poverty, lack of entitlement to social supports and poor housing conditions among Roma- factors which often have a negative effect on school attendance and completion rates. It was highlighted that the lack of adequate and comprehensive National Roma Integration Strategy, including the lack of funding mechanisms, is a major contributor to this situation. As a result, educational practitioners and other stakeholders are working in a vacuum without proper supports and strategies from which to approach the work of Roma inclusion.

It is evident that the challenges and barriers faced by Roma and educational practitioners cannot be overcome without having an adequate framework and funding and monitoring mechanisms. As poverty and poor housing conditions can hinder Roma school attendance and completion rates, the participants highlighted a need for a holistic approach to Roma inclusion. This means that child and adult education need to be addressed in conjunction with issues of employment, housing and health, and that Roma need to be included in the development and implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategy.

It was felt that although many of the 'Successful Educational Experiences' were essentially 'cost neutral', teachers and schools needed to feel supported by the Department of Education when it came to implementing these projects. Given the current economic climate and the increased pressure on teachers to deliver services in the face of pay cuts one of the wider concerns was motivating teachers to initiate new programmes in an

environment of increasingly low morale. The implementation of a meaningful National Roma strategy would not only incentivise the implementation of these actions but also ensure their legitimisation.

### **The Successful Educational Experiences**

The Bulgarian project which focused on 'Decreasing the Drop-out Rate' was considered particularly relevant to the Irish context as it acknowledged that social activities alone are not a sufficient solution to Roma inclusion in education. Rather, they are complementary to overall changes in schools, such as including interactive and intercultural education in teaching methods and curricula and parent participation in the organisation of<sup>i</sup> education.

More specifically, the 'Roma Culture Classes' and 'Interactive Groups'- projects highlight how the role of interactive and intercultural education in schools can reduce the levels of early school leaving and prejudice, and improve social cohesion and academic achievement. These examples were identified as particularly useful as Ireland has 'Intercultural Guidelines' for teachers however there is not a significant amount of practical successful experiences for teachers to draw on. It was also considered that these examples would work both in the context of Roma and Traveller children in the Irish educational situation.

The 'Family and Community Education'- project has shown how education and training among family and community members help to transfer positive attitude to learning among children. The project proved as successful in improving children's academic results and school attendance, and in increasing the level of parents' expectations over their children's educational achievement. Engaging Traveller and Roma parents has proven difficult in an Irish context. This example was also selected for wider distribution to teachers at both primary and post primary level through the national teachers unions and education welfare board.

It was strongly felt that when trying to implement educational practices it is essential to include members of the Roma community working with educational practitioners. Using the

strengths within the Roma community- having access to a Roma liaison officer and enabling parents to develop a sense of ownership over their children's education- were seen as key to achieving permanent change.

It was considered that the *Successful Educational Actions* internationally show how bridging the communication gap between educational practitioners and Roma parents can be narrowed by community development approaches. The Decisive Family/Community Participation model in Spain proved as successful in reducing school attendance and completion rates and improving student achievement.<sup>2</sup> By placing family and community members at the core of decision making they have become integral to the daily workings of the school, such as deciding on the best approach to deal with attendance issues. The flexibility in the participation process can be seen as central to ensuring the greater level of involvement by Roma parents within the project. This project was also selected for dissemination by the committee through their networks and among education practitioners.

The 'Socio-Medical Centres for Roma'- project in Greece was identified as an excellent example of what organisations working with Roma should be striving for. Given that length and depth of the project it was felt that this project should be selected for distribution to Department of Education personnel and other statutory agencies. It was felt that the significant improvements the project had witnessed with regards to improvement in student attendance rates would provide a convincing longitudinal example for government professionals. The strong emphasis the project placed on Roma women in particular with regards to increasing self-confidence and the skills to prepare for education and employment was viewed as particularly impressive. As a result this project was also selected for dissemination to other NGO's who are working with Roma. It was also felt that there were elements of this project that Pavee Point would try to replicate through its own work with the Roma community particularly that focus on women as agents of change.

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<sup>2</sup> ROM-UP! The Inclusion of Roma through Successful Quality Educational Experiences (nd) *European Report 1- Successful Educational Experiences Promoting the Integration of Roma in and through Education*. Education and Culture DG.

## Conclusion

However the major issue remains the lack of political determination to develop an adequate National Roma Integration Strategy. It was felt that the key actions which needed to be taken included continuing to lobby for the introduction of an appropriate national strategy. The successful experiences highlighted above will be disseminated through the networks of the committee members which will include teachers at primary and post primary level, educational welfare officers, teacher training colleges and government officials.

It is evident that there is a need for increased networking among educational practitioners and other relevant stakeholders in order to increase the dissemination of Successful Educational Actions and experiences but also to encourage better practice.

There is a possibility in the future that the committee will look at organising a series of regional seminars on Roma and education, however this would be a long term goal as it would not be possible to accomplish within the timeline of the Rom UP! Project.

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