



PAVEE POINT
TRAVELLERS CENTRE

Roma Communities and Education- Report on Quality Successful Educational Experiences in Ireland

**Rom-Up! The Inclusion of Roma through Quality Successful
Educational Experiences**

Pavee Point Travellers' Centre

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Introduction

As a partner of the European project Rom-Up! Pavee Point is committed to exploring and disseminating experiences of Successful Educational Actions on Roma inclusion in education. This report contributes to knowledge of the experiences and barriers faced by members of the Roma community in the Irish education system, as well as the difficulties faced by Irish educational practitioners and stakeholders in ensuring Roma inclusion. The emphasis relies more on identifying models of *good practice*, as scientifically evidence based *Successful Educational Actions* in terms of Roma inclusion in Ireland are largely absent.¹ This has partly to do with a lack of data available in Ireland aggregated by ethnicity. However, the main obstacle in identifying or measuring Successful Educational Actions is the lack of framework and strategies in place from which Roma inclusion could be promoted and implemented.

This report is based on a seminar held in December 2012 by Pavee Point titled 'Roma Communities and Education'. The seminar was attended by Roma and non-Roma participants, including Roma students and parents and educational practitioners and stakeholders. As part of this seminar participants discussed the challenges and barriers experienced as well as (the lack of) supports and strategies available to ensure Roma inclusion. These experiences were examined in the context of the *Successful Educational Actions* which were compiled through the ROM UP! project with a focus on developing, adapting and/or implementing similar actions in Ireland.

This report outlines discussions held in the seminar from these perspectives. It outlines some of the external, internal and structural barriers. By doing so it pays particular attention to the following themes;

- racism/prejudice and social inclusion
- engaging with Roma parents
- development of an adequate National Roma Integration Strategy

¹ Distinction of 'good practice' and 'Successful Educational Action' as defined in 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.

The report provides an overview of a successful educational experience in St. Mark's Senior National School by focusing on a significant progress in Roma literacy and numeracy skills and diminishing levels of bullying, racism and prejudice. The report then moves onto addressing the difficulty of engaging with Roma parents by exploring the examples of Successful Educational Actions provided by the ROM UP! project.

Finally, the report focuses on the barriers which were identified when it comes to developing and implementing educational actions in the context of an inadequate National Roma Integration Strategy.² The findings highlight not only the need to apply pressure on the Government to develop a comprehensive Strategy, but the need to strengthen the International Romani Network at national level and disseminate the examples of successful experiences.. This report focuses on the challenges and options of doing so in the Irish context.

² See Pavee Point's position paper on Ireland's National Roma Integration Strategy- Pavee Point (2011) *Towards a National Traveller Roma Integration Strategy 2020*. [online] Available from: http://paveepoint.ie/sites/default/files/uploads/2011/10/Towards-National-Traveller-Roma-Strategy_20.09.11.pdf [Accessed 28/1/2013].

1. Experiences of Roma in the Irish Education System

There is almost a complete lack of empirical data in relation to the experiences and barriers faced by Roma in the Irish education system.³ However, it is evident that the issues reflect not only the historical and contemporary experiences of Roma elsewhere in Europe, but also the experiences of Irish Travellers. Based on previous knowledge and the seminar findings, the main challenges consist of internal, external and structural challenges. These include;

- poverty and poor housing conditions
- school attendance and completion rates
- literacy and English language skills
- difficulties with engaging with Roma parents
- low levels of education and training among parents
- lack of cultural training among educational stakeholders
- prejudice and/or racism in local communities and schools
- lack of intercultural education
- absence of strategies and resources for practitioners

Many Roma in Ireland face socio-economic difficulties which acts as a barrier in accessing and engaging in education. Lack of access to employment and social welfare protection, particularly child benefit and 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.⁴ 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

³ See Lesovitch, L. (2005) *Roma Educational Needs in Ireland: Context and Challenges*. [online] Dublin: City of Dublin VEC. Available from: http://www.paveepoint.ie/pdf/Roma_Report.pdf.

⁴ 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].

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.

It was¹ highlighted by several participants that Roma parents are eager for their children to engage in education and that Roma children want to go to school however, attendance remains an issue among Roma children. 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. Given the lack of a national database this makes it difficult for education welfare officers and teachers 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 older children in particular prove difficult to integrate into the school system if they have never received any formal education. Roma parents who have not attended school themselves may 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. Core to this relationship deficit is often a very real distrust by Roma parents of perceived authority figures and/or civil servants. Seminar participants were particularly interested in exploring and learning from some of the international *Successful Educational Actions* in terms of ways to encourage parental engagement.

1.1 From Prejudice and Racism towards Increased Levels of Inclusion and Academic Achievement

Racism, prejudice and bullying were raised as issues experienced by Roma students in schools and local communities. Many Roma participants reported feeling socially

isolated and finding integrating into school life and the local community difficult. As a result, frequently Roma and non-Roma students would not socialise together, in, or outside of school.

A Roma student in St. Mark's Senior National School provided an insight into his experiences. He talked about being subjected to racism and prejudice in the first school he attended in Ireland but felt that this had diminished after changing schools to St. Mark's. He viewed the role of the school as having a strict approach to bullying and his engagement in school activities and clubs to have contributed to reduced levels of bullying and prejudice and increased integration into the school life.

In general, the principal in St. Mark's witnessed a considerable improvement in Roma literacy and numeracy skills. Roma students were also noted as increasingly integrating into school life and have become valued members of the community through engaging in sports activities and other clubs. It was felt that extra supports including breakfast and homework clubs which have been introduced in other schools in Ireland have been a great source of support for many disadvantaged Roma children. Participants noted that the *Successful Educational Experiences* provided an interesting source of information around other ways to further cement and encourage Roma integration in schools. However participants noted that there was a significant lack of support in terms of government policy and funding in this area particularly with regard to the Roma community. A number of participants remarked how difficult it was becoming to provide even the most basic supports due to budget cuts.

The experiences of Roma students are important in examining the approaches and practices applied by the school, as well as similar educational actions internationally. St. Marks school which presented at the seminar, has a significant population of students with an immigrant background, including many Roma. It has a strict approach on bullying, and regards total integration as one of its core aims. Due to lack of funding from the Government the school is engaged in constant fundraising to finance its activities and support structures. The strategies and structures that exist apply to all students- there are no Roma specific strategies or supports. The school along with other participants at the seminar noted the desperate need for supports and services which specifically targeted Roma children given their significantly disadvantaged status in Irish society.

To guide the development of future strategies and complement existing approaches, such as in St. Mark's, elements from several projects within the International Romani Network were identified by participants as particularly valuable. These projects include 'Socio-Medical Centres for Roma' (Greece), 'Decreasing the Drop-out Rate among Roma Children' (Bulgaria), 'Family and Community Education' (Spain), 'Roma Culture Classes' (Bulgaria), and 'Interactive Groups' (Spain).⁵

'Decreasing the Drop-out Rate'- project has 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 of² education. Seminar participants mentioned that this action would work particularly well but that there was a 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. On the other hand, 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.

1.2 Engaging with Roma Parents

A key challenge among educational practitioners is to find ways to engage with Roma parents. The need to improve the level of communication, and ultimately trust in schools and teachers, is at the core of aiming to improve attendance and school completion rates.

⁵ 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.

It was acknowledged that experiences of racism and discrimination in country of origin and in Ireland shape the level of trust among Roma in Ireland. For this reason, several participants, particularly Roma participants, strongly agreed 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.

In fact, 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.⁶ 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.

1.3 A Holistic Approach to Roma Inclusion- National Roma Integration Strategy

The participants were unanimous in their view that 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

⁶ 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.

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.

The 'Socio-Medical Centres for Roma'- project in Greece provides a unique insight into achieving such as change. The project has witnessed a significant improvement in student attendance rates and Roma parents coming to see the value of education. It has provided Roma women in particular with self-confidence and skills to prepare for education and employment, and has observed substantial changes in terms of improving the educational achievement and engagement of both children and adults. Similar approach to Roma inclusion that would target education, housing, employment and health is urgently needed in Ireland. The major issue remains the lack of political determination to develop an adequate National Roma Integration Strategy.

2. Disseminating and Transferring Successful Educational Experiences in Ireland

As part of the seminar on 'Roma Community and Education' in 2012, Pavee Point is publishing a report based on the seminar findings. The report is designed to act as a resource for educational practitioners and stakeholders and other interested parties. It provides general information on Roma in Europe and Ireland as well as specific information on Roma and educational considerations in the Irish context. The report includes key findings on the issues, barriers and positive educational experiences in terms of Roma education both nationally and internationally. This is intended to provide educational practitioners and stakeholders with guidelines and frameworks from which to promote Roma inclusion and lobby towards the development of an adequate National Roma Integration Strategy. The report is disseminated to seminar participants and other relevant parties and organisations.

Some participants highlighted that possible knowledge and expertise to promote Roma inclusion in Ireland already exists. The participants, who highlighted similarities between the experiences of Travellers and Roma in the education system, discussed the possibility of learning from the Traveller experiences. It was highlighted how (parts of) the structures for promoting Traveller education already in place could be used to guide the inclusion of Roma in the education system. In this way, the participants felt that there was no need to reinvent structures for Roma inclusion but, rather, to utilise or adapt some of the already existing knowledge for the purposes of developing a framework for Roma inclusion.

The strategies of Traveller inclusion and international Successful Educational Actions are worthy of further exploration in the process of developing the National Roma Integration Strategy. The dissemination of International Romani Network becomes vital at this stage: successful methods within the Network can be used as empirical evidence and their elements as possible basis for strategies in Ireland.

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. Seminars, such as the one held by Pavee Point, are one way for practitioners and stakeholders to network, discuss and disseminate their knowledge and experiences. However, in order to transfer educational *experiences* into *action*, an adequate National Roma Integration Strategy in Ireland is needed.

Conclusion

Roma in Ireland face significant barriers and challenges to access and engage in education. As a result of structural, internal and external barriers the issues include school attendance and completion rates, levels of academic achievement and financial difficulties. In ensuring Roma inclusion in the education system, educational practitioners face significant barriers in their work due to the lack of framework from which to approach Roma inclusion.

This report has focused on three main barriers and challenges that Roma and educational practitioners in Ireland face; racism and prejudice/social inclusion, engaging with Roma parents, and the lack of adequate National Roma Integration Strategy. The discussion around these issues in the context of successful educational experiences nationally and internationally highlights some of the methods that could be embedded in formal educational strategies in Ireland in the future. These include community development approaches, such as family and community training initiatives, and holistic approaches that address education, housing, employment and health needs of members of the Roma community.

The task of Roma inclusion in the education system in Ireland remains challenging due to the inadequate framework, funding and monitoring mechanisms. In fact, the main barrier is the lack of adequate National Roma Integration Strategy that would provide a comprehensive framework from which to address the multifaceted needs of Roma communities in Ireland. In this context, educational practitioners are working in a vacuum without proper support structures. The development of an adequate National Roma Integration Strategy and the dissemination of the International Romani Network become crucial tasks in order to tackle the issue of Roma inclusion in the Irish education system.
