



Education of Roma children in Europe

Connecting non-formal educational actions to formal education

-From teaching kit to school-

Directorate General IV
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Division for the European Dimension of Education

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to formal education***

-From teaching kit to school-

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1. Abstract

This study comes under the European project initiated by the Council of Europe: Education of Roma children in Europe, aimed at implementing Recommendation No R (2000) 4

of the Committee of Ministers to member states on *the education of Roma/Gypsy children in Europe*. The implementation of the recommendation, which concerns the 49 signatory states to the European Cultural Convention of the Council of Europe, has an overall scheme of organisation that comprises several types of activities (training seminars, analyses of good practices, production of teaching material, publications, etc.).

This file presents the results of the trial of the teaching kit, a learning tool intended for 5-7 year old children.

This tool is meant to make Roma minorities appreciate the importance of schooling for their children. Thanks to its basic principles (scientific content, flexibility in terms of adaptability to the different age bands; low cost), the idea gains ground that it could be suited to classroom situations and to other minorities meeting with educational difficulties which are similar in certain respects (at least the economic and practical ones) to those of Roma minorities (material difficulties, remoteness from school...).

2. Introduction

School education programmes and cultural development for minorities and migrants are among the overriding concerns of the European and international institutions. There are many projects put forward by a number of international agencies and bodies, ranging from teachers' and mediators' training in intercultural education to pre-school, primary and secondary teaching syllabi. Using intercultural educational methodology as a prime instrument, these projects set out to promote equalisation of opportunities for these population groups and to ensure their optimum integration into the life of society and the economy. In this context, children's education receives special attention, the aim being to foster better integration of children from minorities into the school system, while respecting their cultural identity.

3. Design of a suitable tool: the teaching kit

The general idea behind the tool devised by the Council of Europe, discussed in this text, is that not only are minorities to be respected, both for ethical reasons and for what they offer mankind as a whole; they should also be allowed to play their part in economic, cultural and technical exchanges.

Given the observed fact that the presence of persons alien to Roma communities is often unwillingly borne, it seemed that the presence of teaching material would be more readily accepted, as a source of activities which are meaningful in relation to the setting where people live. That is true of the teaching kit; it is a highly portable and inexpensive tool, allowing for both the spatial and the economic constraints identified with Roma communities.

The operator's function in relation to the tool is to teach adults its use. In this context, it is anticipated that the adults will gradually espouse, or at the very least appreciate, the patterns of thought required by the activities expected of the children. The knowledge and the values involved are shared by the school, so theoretically the teaching kit's joint activities for adults and children prepare the latter for school education.

3.1. A tool for young children's early scientific learning

The scientific field was chosen on the premise that the sciences, through their claims to universality, are especially fertile ground for uniting communities that may be actuated by very different values. The idea which drives this approach is that since scientific explanations are cross-cultural in essence, working with them could transcend cultural peculiarities; thus the sciences are held to be an ideal setting for socialisation in the sense of sharing supra-community values.

The tool devised concerns young children of an age to begin compulsory education (5-8 years). The kit is intended for use in families, with the function of making them realise the advantage to themselves of knowledge transmitted largely by school. As a result of the interest possibly raised by the use of such a tool, we anticipate that the families will value it a means of getting at useful knowledge and thus will come to alter their perception of educational provision outside the Roma community.

The activities are designed to enable children to develop basic skills (classifying, comparing, interpreting images, writing with images, counting, drawing, colouring in, making links, assembling, observing, measuring, experimenting, etc.) necessary for adaptation to primary school (Council of Europe, 2006). A first prototype of the tool has been devised (cf. Figure 1): it is a kit containing a full set of materials suitable for children aged 5-8, not enrolled in school, with which they can easily conduct experiments on subjects related to concerns bearing closely on the environment in which they live.



Example of the material in the kit:

- lenses for observation, insect specimen slides with butterflies and ants; seeds,
- floating and sinking objects; gloves,
- electric wire, bulbs, diodes, new batteries and dismantled batteries,
- geometrical shapes, etc.

Figure 1: Example of the prototype teaching kit

These activities were chosen with an eye to their immediate usefulness in day-to-day life, some for adults and others for children in order to stimulate and/or facilitate interaction between the family members present during the activities.

3.2. Constructional principles of the teaching kit

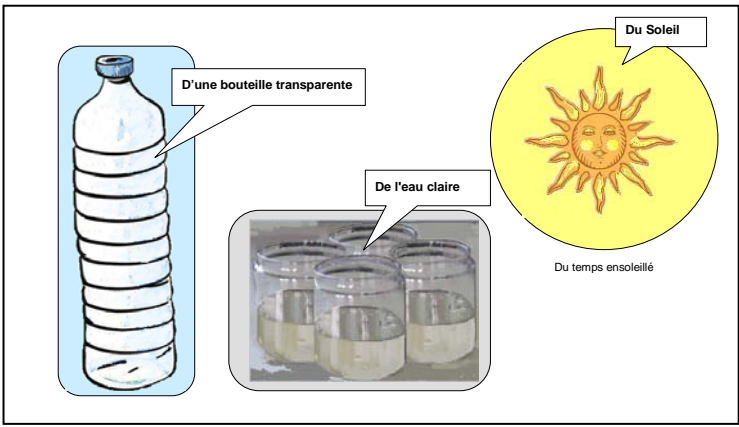
Essential principles underlying the design of the material included in the kit and of the activities suggested by means of fact-sheets:

- conformity to school syllabi – the idea is for children to acquire a minimum of abstract and practical knowledge prescribed in the curricula, to aid their school integration;
- autonomy and tutoring – some activities are intended to be conducted independently by the child, others with a tutor, the latter seeking to inform adults about the learning content above and beyond reading, writing and counting, and to impress upon children the benefits which they can derive from adults' help in acquiring new knowledge;

- practical usefulness and meaning - the activities pertain to areas of practice that concern the minority (obtaining clean water, commanding energy, producing more easily or more economically, etc.); they start from immediate considerations (“what is it for?”), then move towards more and more elaborated propositions that lead to questions of meaning (“what must you do to...”, “why?”); the learner is to be made to realise the usefulness of the learning, and the advantage of knowledge in its various components (advantage to self and to group of affiliation);
- moderateness of costs – the activities employ inexpensive material generally available in homes: lemon, copper, pails, sand, etc.;
- clarity of the directions - the possible forms of experimentation are set out in fact-sheets with an essentially pictorial design, as the adults concerned are usually illiterate);
- sturdiness of the material – this aspect is imperative, given the setting and the conditions of use (out in the yard, in the kitchen, while looking after smaller brothers and sisters, etc.); thus the fact-sheets are produced with a twist-resistant, damp-proof backing.

3.3. First prototype of the teaching kit

The first prototype to be designed offers some twenty activities; of these, let us mention growing plants, observing animals, making your own battery, building a torch, understanding the operation of a windmill, constructing a water filter to clarify water, learning to purify water and make it drinkable, etc. A specimen activity is presented in Figure 2.



D'une bouteille transparente

De l'eau claire

Du Soleil

Du temps ensoleillé

(This activity forms a sequel to other activities on the theme of water)

Material:

- empty transparent bottles (glass or plastic), rinsed with drinking water,
- clear water, either decanted or filtered beforehand (with a water filter built during a previous activity),
- choose a very sunny day.

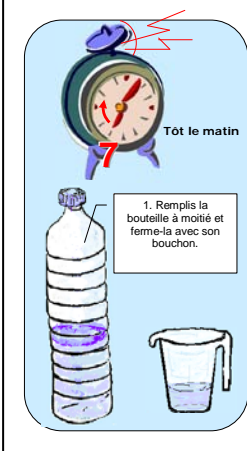
Directions:

1. Half fill the bottle and close it with its cap or stopper.
2. Shake the bottle well; the water should be churned so as to absorb oxygen, which helps the ultraviolet rays of the sun to kill the microorganisms present in the water.
3. Fill the bottle right up with clear water.
4. Lay the bottle on a roof or in a place where it can warm up.
5. Leave the bottle in the sun until late afternoon, for at least 5 hours in direct sunlight, 2 days if the sky is overcast.
6. At the end of the day, the sunlight will have killed most of the germs in the water.
7. This water is fit for drinking and consumption.

Drinking water:

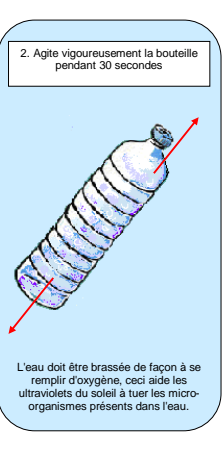
The sunlight has killed the bacteria, so the water is fit to drink.

Water can be made drinkable by boiling it.




Tôt le matin

1. Remplis la bouteille à moitié et ferme-la avec son bouchon.

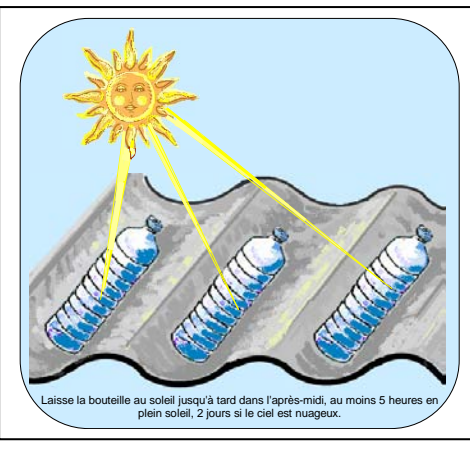


2. Agite vigoureusement la bouteille pendant 30 secondes


L'eau doit être brassée de façon à se remplir d'oxygène, ceci aide les ultraviolets du soleil à tuer les micro-organismes présents dans l'eau.



3. Finis de remplir la bouteille avec de l'eau claire



Laisse la bouteille au soleil jusqu'à tard dans l'après-midi, au moins 5 heures en plein soleil, 2 jours si le ciel est nuageux.



A la fin de la journée le soleil aura tué la plupart des microbes présents dans l'eau.

5. Tu peux boire cette eau et l'utiliser comme eau potable.

III. At the end of the activity, the child should be able to...

1. Distinguish between clear water and drinking water,
2. Know the steps for treating water by sunlight,
3. Formulate and test hypotheses,
4. Conduct simple experiments.

Figure 2: Excerpt from activity 9 : “Solar water treatment”

4. Evaluation of the teaching kit

4.1. Aims of evaluation

The evaluation carried out has three aims:

- (1) to assess the acceptability of the material for the minorities concerned, and the activities which it generates;
- (2) to specify the type of guidance needed for adults to be able to make independent use of it with their children;
- (3) to assess the impact of the action in terms of aspirations for the children's schooling.

Where acceptability is concerned, what happened to the material between the operator's successive visits was observed and the participants' opinions about it during the meetings were registered; besides, the substance of the exchanges between adults and children when using the kit was analysed. As to the operator's methodology, the analysis proceeds from a study of the exchanges during the various encounters (presentation of the material and monitoring of its use). Lastly, the impact of the trial in terms of educational aspirations is measured with reference to the parents' remarks about school and the knowledge taught, to their plans for the child's schooling and support, and to their stated determination in that regard. In a very general way, the procedure adopted was one combining the ethnographic approach and the analysis of social interactions.

4.2. Research population and sequence

The research was conducted in three communities of Romania (resident in different towns), over a period of three months in each community. The sample studied was composed of five Roma families with children aged 5 to 8, not enrolled in school.

The families were chosen according to their children's school situation (situation identified on the basis of an interview with the head of their district school: not enrolled or recording intermittent school attendance) and after securing the family's consent and the child's acceptance, following a personalised presentation of the trial. Indeed, arousing the child's interest in the activity is indispensable given his/her place in the family (consideration and satisfaction of the child's wishes by the parents).

During an initial visit, the material was presented to the families, and the voluntary participants were guided in carrying out the first experiments (cf. figure 3). In each family, a volunteer mediator ensured the tutoring of the children at the rate of one or more visits per month:

- in the first family (belonging to an “Ursari” Roma community, the researcher alone played the part of mediator. As the researcher did not speak their language, his work was done in Romanian, known to all members of the family,
- in the second family (which used to belong to a “Lingurari” Roma community and was currently living precariously in the town centre), three non-Roma volunteer mediators not speaking Romani intervened. This family had an average command of Romanian, the second language for them.



Figure 3 “Lingurari” community, polydyad of operator and children

- for the third family (belonging to a community of Roma “tinkers”), from the very first visit a young Romani offered herself as mediator and asked for impromptu training by the researcher. She performed the role of mediator throughout the trial period. From time to time and according to her free choice, she reported on her activities to the schoolteacher.



Figure 4 “Tinkers” community: polydyad of operator, Roma mediator and children

Since the material was left at the disposal of the families, self-reliant actions were suggested in the intervals between the mediator’s successive visits.

It was suggested that the various activities and achievements should be recorded in an experimental notebook. The book was to make children and parents aware of the learning processes that had occurred, and to form a basis for discussion with the mediator and/or researcher. Also, at a later stage the book was to be a means of informing the teacher of the class which the child would join how his/her skills had developed.

4.3. The pilot study

Presentation of some facts arising from this first study which, using the same teaching material and the same initial approach, took place in three family groups displaying very different characteristics in two respects:

1. from the standpoint of the persons present at the encounters which occurred during activities with the kit:
 - The first group consists of 5-9 persons: four or five children present, the mother, the father and a grandmother and an uncle, the other adults being irregular in their attendance.
 - The second group consists of a grandmother and her daughter, and two children; other adults and other children may be present at certain times but do not seem at all involved in the activities.
 - The third group consists of a grandmother and eight children. Also present are two adults who, though indifferent at the start, would join in the activity of their own free will, respond to it, and participate in the observations. At other times of the day when the visits were held, the groups could obviously be much larger.
2. From the standpoint of the proposed mediation (number of times mediator present in the families, type of tutorship (expert / lay), working language):



Figure 5 : Non-Roma researcher in an experimental setting.

- For the first group, there are three attendances by the researcher who acted as an “expert” mediator, in Romanian (the “second language” for the community). The teaching kit was left in self-management and two adults (mother and grandmother) were acquainted with tutoring.

- For the second group, there were seven visits by three expert mediators. Their actions were also conducted in Romanian (the “second language” for the community). Between their visits the kit was offered in self-management.



Figure 6 : family 2, non-Roma mediator making a visit at the end of the trial.



- The third group had a lay mediator (but acquainted by the researcher with the use of the kit). This mediator performed tutoring in the mother tongue, Romani. Only part of the material was left in self-management.

Figure 7 : Roma mediator, forming part of the community

For all the operators and families, the time spent in using the kit was about 40 minutes. A certain time (which varied according to the visits and the families) was devoted to miscellaneous activities and exchanges, affording as many opportunities to observe the group's practices and customs.

The various trials were either recorded in full (so that the practice could undergo retrospective critical analysis), or noted down from the mediator's observations. This analysis can be the basis for enhancing the mediators' training or contemplating improvements.

The first encounter with these families was very difficult, and the mediators had to call upon many go-betweens (the district schoolteacher, a doctor who had treated them, the priest, a neighbour of the community, the mayor, etc.). Once the obstacle of the first visit was overcome, contacts were far easier, with the persons showing a definite interest in the operators' arrival and in the activities proposed.

4.4. Processing the data collected

The data analysed relate to the interactions when the kit was in use. These are "polydyadic" (multiple two-way) interactions in which we singled out the exchanges involving the operator and the adults in the group, the operator and the children, and the adults in the group and the children. Several systems of analysis were activated to ascertain the places occupied and the functions performed by the various partners, as well as the tutoring behaviour, the forms of co-operation and co-construction; very generally, the inter-discursive processes whereby knowledge is built up. Lastly, the analysis is to identify and specify the activities conducted, any obstacles, and the knowledge being built up. The non-verbal indices were signs of interest in the activity (direction of the glance, physical distance from objects, gestures...).

In general, the involvement of the adults and children in the proposed activities is deemed an indicator of their possible support for the educational scheme overarching the activities.

In this experimental study, the aforementioned analyses were amplified by analysing the interviews with the parents, the children and certain players involved (eg schoolteacher, Roma mediator of the community – for the third family). These interviews allowed parents' conceptions of the importance of school to be determined; usually the perceived value of schooling is confined to gaining the elementary school certificate, as this is stipulated to meet utilitarian needs like driving school enrolment. The interviews also establish whether a coherent relationship exists between “saying and doing”, between conceptions and practices; some interviews show that young mothers wish their child to be educated but this attitude remains wishful (the social and economic reasons certainly stand as difficult factors to overcome).

5. Discussion of the tool and its significance

5.1. The kit in the families; child and parent support

The findings of this study suggest that the teaching kit enjoys considerable support on the part of the minority communities in which it was tested.

The adults participate in the activities, initially out of personal interest, then to “tutor” the child during the activity.

The analyses of the recordings show that the help given by the mothers and grandmothers (the latter very much present in the life of the family and the community) is marked by imitation of the expert tutor: they demonstrate, put questions, wait for the reply, etc.



Figure 8 : left to right

- Grandmother family 1 taking part in the activity on persistence of vision, “build your own zoetrope”.
- Grandmother family 2 (town centre), taking care of the kit between mediators' visits.
- Far right: grandmother (“tinker” community) taking part in the observation of ants

The findings also suggest that the project is strongly supported by the children. That may be due to the “achievement-oriented teaching approach”, developed by means of the kit, making

the most of what children can do without penalising them for what they do badly (Cotonnec, 1986).



Figure 9: left to right

- Children fumbling to turn on a small light (“Ursari” community)
- Children, observing insects (“Lingurari” community).
- Far right: children and adults studying insects through lenses (“tinker” community)

In the specific framework of the Roma community, the teaching kit as a tool lets families feel they are not being directly challenged or called into question for their children’s absence from school. Their involvement in using the teaching kit is a matter of free choice for them, as it is for the children. The groups encountered genuinely addressed the questions associated with the material made available to them; in this way, they entered into procedures new to them using resources of their own, their level of involvement being left to their discretion (as evidenced by the scenes filmed, with their consent, with a digital mini-camera). This confirms how important it is to have mediation tools for containing the rejection and/or distrust necessarily aroused by clash of cultures and overcoming them so as to join in a learning process. The tool facilitates relations between the operator representing the majority culture and the members of the minority culture targeted by the scheme; besides, it affords means of conducting activities that are worthwhile in relation to the school’s expectations and the concerns of minority populations; lastly, it is the vehicle for knowledge of universal value (whose worth has at no time been contested).

5.2. What type of guidance do adults need for successful, independent use of the kit?

These initial observations are an encouragement to develop research on parent education programmes directed at Roma families. While these educational practices (help with homework) exist in the families of the majority population, and while the training programmes help people try to do better, in minority communities a training programme would be necessary to introduce them to a practice which they do not grasp. In other words,

since the population is not experienced in these practices, it is desirable that the operators should provide models of “good practices”, construed as practices conducive to children’s acquisition of knowledge, both as regards the necessary attitudes (shared attention, memorisation, reflexivity, ...) and as regards the necessary intellectual processes (classification, association, comparison, discussion...) – meaning that the operators should be mediators / expert tutors.

5.3. Connections with school

The kit scored a great success with the three communities, but what about the attainment of its initial objectives? How is the impact of the operation to be assessed in terms of aspirations for children’s schooling? Who is the mediator, and what are the connections with school?

The findings of the study revealed that only in the “tinker” community was there any carryover and consideration of the kit in the school setting.

The experimentation in this community had some special features that apparently played an important part: a bilingual mediator (1), belonging to the community (2), having “tutored” the children mainly in Romani (3), regular exchanges (albeit spontaneous) between the mediator and the schoolteacher (4).



Figure 10 : Schoolteacher visiting the Roma families (pictured delivering the school report). During these visits, he has exchanges with the mediator in charge of the teaching kit.

Which working language for the kit?

At present there is an international consensus that “all persons are entitled to quality education and training that fully respect their cultural identity” (UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001, Article 5). Looking towards the “education for all” expounded at the Global Forum on Education, language must in no circumstances be a source of discrimination. On the contrary, it is apprehended firstly as an instrument of communication and knowledge and secondly as an essential vehicle of identity and empowerment.

Recognition of minority or indigenous languages is attended by specific measures: “Children belonging to the peoples concerned shall, wherever practicable, be taught to read and write in their own indigenous language” (ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989, Article 28(1)).

The final report of the International Conference on Education stresses its importance: “It is increasingly obvious that the language of instruction at the beginning of one’s education, at such a crucial moment for future learning, should be the mother tongue.” (ICE, 2001, p.11). However, the provisions adopted in favour of the pupils’ first language need to be incorporated into an overall educational programme as “a careful balance also needs to be made between enabling people to use local languages in learning and providing access to global languages of communication” (UNESCO, 2003 : 8).

International recommendations may favourably entertain the question of choice of language of schooling (choice to be respected for applying the activities in the kit as well), what is the position as regards learning the language of schooling and of written expression?

Multipolar effects favouring the success of Roma children

Recent studies have shown that the mediator's action is beneficial to command of the second language (school language) in so far as children's mental structuring in the mother tongue aids educational inclusion and subsequent transfers in the second language. This structuring is achieved through conscious language use, organised in a context of interaction with peers, on the basis of objects and teaching methods specific to the communities.



The first language helps the child build reference points and categories and to transpose his learning processes into the language of schooling. That is to say, with their own original language and culture as the medium, pupils create their own conditions for acquiring another language and another culture.

Figure 11 : Mother-tongue mediator (foreground), bilingual mediator and schoolteacher in the “tinker” community.

Educational inclusion is a process, recently promoted at the international level, focusing on the education system in order to make it receptive to all. It is defined as a “planned intervention” (Rousseau, Bélanger, 2004) founded on a philosophy of learning applicable to all pupils, characterised by two strong assertions:

- The first is that diversity in all its forms is not an obstacle but an asset to be exploited. It emphasises that “inclusion is based on a recognition of the capacities and potential of all children to develop if the environment is responsive to their needs” (UNESCO, 1997 : 16).
- The second holds that collaboration by all educational players (parents, teachers, school support providers, children whether or not pupils) is conducive to academic achievement. Indeed, a large body of research demonstrates the essential link between the community and the school (Vérillon & Belmont, 2003). This educational approach furnishes the linguistic/cultural adaptations and the necessary help - via the “bilingual cultural mediator” arrangement – for pupils and teachers each to participate meaningfully in school life. It sets out to nurture in all pupils a sense of belonging and self-esteem (Mackay, 2006).

6. Perspectives

The study presented here would be worth extending to a number of communities and countries in order to confirm these first results.

For children never having attended school, the mediator's action might be organised in stages: one visit per week during the first two months, two per week for the next two months and three per week for the last two months. This progressive and regular pace of activities supervised by a tutor from outside the family serves to prepare for the regular daily pattern of school.

For the time being, the action of the bilingual cultural mediators proves complex as well as positive. It is complex because, while purportedly acting on the single platform of "the sciences", it helps establish not only skills in the mother tongue and native culture but also more general cognitive abilities not directly linked with the school activities. It is positive because of its outcomes: improving children's learning potential, identifiable by their ability to analyse and reproduce complex representations, and, through the sciences, activating the second language – that of the school.

Moreover, thanks to the mediator each pupil not speaking the language of instruction and having learning difficulties can find his place in the school, exercise his right to an education which respects his cultural identity, and do his duty as a pupil.

The prudent balancing of educational and community demands no doubt largely accounts for the quite favourable reception of the researchers and mediators. Of course, the points of operators' practice and the terms of their training remain to be more adequately specified. It is now known in fact that the value of educational tool depends very much on their uses by educators.

The educational goal is partly for parents and children to realise the benefit of the learning normally instilled by school, in order that they may welcome educational opportunities, and partly to change the view that the majority population (and some teachers) take of the achievements and abilities of children belonging to minorities. These are indeed essential components of the learning process: objects being charged with knowledge by the children and families; teachers' acceptance and understanding of the children.

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