

The role of the Romani language in the educational inclusion of Romani children and adolescents: plurilingual education in action

Some policy guidelines and a proposal

Executive summary

Despite the Council of Europe's decades-long engagement with Romani issues, the educational inclusion of Romani children and adolescents continues to present major challenges to member states. Successive Council of Europe Recommendations are clear about the principles that should shape policy and the outcomes that policy implementation should achieve. They do not, however, concern themselves with those aspects of policy that shape classroom practice. This document addresses that gap, outlining new ways of managing the educational inclusion of Romani children and adolescents that are based on the Council of Europe's concept of plurilingual education. Its proposals have implications for the educational inclusion of other linguistic and cultural minorities.

The approach adopted is inspired by four principles that underpin the Council of Europe's work in education generally and language education in particular:

- all residents in Council of Europe member states enjoy the same right to an education that is designed to prepare them for active participation in democratic society;
- the social, educational and linguistic integration of minorities is a two-way process that should have positive consequences for the majority as well as the minority population;
- teaching approaches should seek to develop the individual learner's capacity to act as an autonomous social agent;
- language education should seek to foster the development of integrated plurilingual repertoires, taking account of all languages present in a given institution – the language of instruction, curriculum languages, and the home and heritage languages of learners from linguistic minorities.

This document

- recapitulates Council of Europe policy regarding the education of Romani children and adolescents;
- summarizes the implications of the Council of Europe's view that the integration of minorities should be a two-way process;
- provides a brief overview of the highly variable linguistic profiles of Romani communities;
- explains the pedagogical implications of two key Council of Europe concepts:
 - the (language) learner as an autonomous social agent
 - plurilingual and intercultural education;
- identifies five general principles to guide the educational inclusion of Romani children and adolescents;

- proposes a four-year project that will explore ways of implementing these principles with official support in a small number of schools in a small number of countries with a view to compiling and disseminating a manual of good practice that will be relevant to the educational inclusion of other linguistic minorities.

1 The educational inclusion of Romani children and adolescents: Council of Europe policy

The Council of Europe has been committed to the educational inclusion of Roma for 50 years. In 1969, Recommendation 563 of the Consultative Assembly (forerunner of the Parliamentary Assembly) urged governments to take measures to eradicate discrimination against “Gypsies and other travellers” and included education for Gypsy and traveller children and adults among its many other provisions.

More recently, Recommendation R (2000) 4 of the Committee of Ministers recognized “an urgent need to build new foundations for future educational strategies towards the Roma/Gypsy people in Europe, particularly in view of the high rates of illiteracy or semi-literacy among them, their high drop-out rate, the low percentage of students completing primary education and the persistence of features such as low school attendance”. The Recommendation noted that “the problems faced by Roma/Gypsies in the field of schooling are largely the result of long-standing educational policies of the past”. This point was repeated in Recommendation (2009) 4, which noted that such policies “can lead either to assimilation or to segregation of Roma and Traveller children at school on the grounds that they were ‘socially and culturally handicapped’”.

More general Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers also have clear implications for the educational inclusion of Romani children and adolescents. For example, Recommendation (2008) 4, on strengthening the integration of children of migrants and of immigrant background, urges that member states should support the development of their proficiency in the language of schooling, which might also include “the acquisition and maintenance of their mother tongue”. Recommendation (2012) 13, on ensuring quality education, is similarly applicable to Roma: quality education “gives access to learning to all pupils and students, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, adapted to their needs as appropriate”. Recommendation (2014) 5, on the importance of competences in the language(s) of schooling for equity and quality in education and for educational success, is also relevant: “The right to education can be fully exercised only if learners are proficient in the language of schooling.”

Despite these and other Recommendations, problems remain, including those identified in 2006 by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities: “The Advisory Committee has repeatedly criticised practices of segregation of Roma students and welcomed efforts to end such practices. Other problems encountered are the bullying of Roma children by other children, or even by teachers, inappropriate and culturally biased tests used in the educational systems, the lack of recognition of the Romani language in schools.” The Advisory Committee also acknowledged the crucial role to be played

by Romani: “The importance of teaching of and through the medium of the Romani language is increasingly discussed in State Reports and in the Opinions of the Advisory Committee as a necessary element of the efforts to ensure access to education for the Roma.”

2 The integration of minorities: a two-way process

The European Cultural Convention (1954) commits the Council of Europe to the protection of linguistic and cultural diversity, and this provides it with a further reason to work for the educational, social and linguistic inclusion of Romani children and adolescents. Romani language, history and culture are intrinsic to the various Romani communities of Europe, but they are also part of Europe’s larger linguistic, historical and cultural heritage. It is widely recognized that the educational inclusion of Romani children and adolescents requires that Romani language, history and culture play a role in their schooling as a matter of respect and equality of esteem. It is much less widely recognized, however, that the Council of Europe’s understanding of integration as a reciprocal, two-way process¹ entails that where instruction in Romani language, history and culture is provided for Romani children and adolescents, it should also be available to their non-Romani peers. In the absence of such availability, the teaching of Romani language, history and culture is an instrument of segregation rather than integration.

The inclusion of Romani children and adolescents, however, should not be seen simply as a matter of providing Romani language classes. A policy of educational inclusion implies openness to diversity of ethnicity, culture and language; all classrooms should be spaces where all learners can express and, in some cases, discover their identities. This is the essence of plurilingual education. Romani children and adolescents whose home language is a variety of Romani should have opportunities to use that language to support their learning in all areas of the curriculum (see section 6 below, on plurilingual education).

3 The variable status of the Romani language in Romani communities and the variable proficiency of Romani children and adolescents in the language of schooling

Linguistically, Romani communities fall into three broad categories:

- those that have lost the Romani variety spoken by earlier generations;
- those in which older members of the community still use Romani on a daily basis, whereas children and adolescents hear and understand Romani but choose not to use it in their daily lives;
- those that have retained a variety of Romani as their domestic and community language.

Whatever their relation to the Romani language, Romani children and adolescents fall into three broad categories as regards the language of schooling:

- those for whom the language of schooling presents no difficulties;
- those who speak a non-standard variety of the dominant language and thus need help to

¹ See, for example, the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, *Living Together as Equals in Dignity*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2008, https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf.

become proficient in the (standard) language of schooling;

- those who lack proficiency in the language of schooling, perhaps as a result of recent migration.

Thus, education systems must find ways of responding to one or more of nine possible linguistic profiles.

4 From policy to classroom practice

The appendix to Committee of Ministers Recommendation (2000) 4, on the education of Roma and Gypsy children in Europe, includes a number of guiding principles regarding the need for flexible structures, curriculum and teaching material, the recruitment and training of teachers, the need to monitor and evaluate whatever measures are taken, and the need for consultation and coordination. These are self-evident requirements, but the question remains: given the diversity of linguistic profiles that must be accommodated, how are principles to be translated into successful practice? The educational goals of the more general Recommendations cited above prompt the same question. According to Recommendation (2012) 13, for example, quality education “develops each pupil’s and student’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential and encourages them to complete the educational programmes in which they enrol”; it also “enables pupils and students to develop appropriate competences, self-confidence and critical thinking to help them become responsible citizens and improve their employability”. But how exactly does quality education do these things? These and related questions can be answered with reference to two key concepts that underlie the Council of Europe’s approach to language education: the (language) learner as an autonomous social agent and plurilingualism as an overarching educational goal.

5 The (language) learner as an autonomous social agent

In accordance with its commitment to human rights and democratic governance, the Council of Europe has always promoted learner-centred approaches to education. This explains the interest of early modern languages projects in learner autonomy² and self-assessment.³ It also explains why Council of Europe instruments designed to support the development of curricula, teaching materials and assessment instruments focus not on the language to be learned but on the communicative needs of the individual learner. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR)⁴ “views users and learners of a language primarily as ‘social agents’, i.e. members of society who have tasks ... to accomplish”.⁵ Accordingly, the CEFR defines language proficiency in terms of language use: what the user/learner can do at successive levels; the use of “can do” descriptors explicitly associates language proficiency with

² H. Holec, *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1979.

³ M. Oskarsson, *Approaches to Self-assessment in Foreign Language Learning*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1978.

⁴ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Also available from the Council of Europe’s website:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>.

⁵ CEFR, p.9.

individual agency. Although the CEFR does not say how languages should be taught, it assumes that “the language learner is in the process of becoming a language user”.⁶ In other words, there is a strong presumption that spontaneous interactive use of the target language will play a central role in teaching and learning.

The Council of Europe developed the concept of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) in parallel with the CEFR in order to provide language learners with a tool that would help them to manage their own learning and thus become autonomous. The ELP has three obligatory components: a language passport in which learners record and regularly update their experience of learning and using languages other than their mother tongue; a language biography that provides a reflective accompaniment to learning; and a dossier in which learners collect evidence of their developing proficiency. Learners use checklists of “I can” descriptors arranged according to the communicative activities and proficiency levels of the CEFR to identify learning targets and self-assess learning progress and outcomes.

Versions of these instruments already exist for Romani. The Council of Europe’s *Curriculum Framework for Romani* (CFR) was launched at a seminar in Strasbourg in 2007 and published in a slightly revised version in 2008. The CEFR was developed to provide “a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks etc. across Europe”;⁷ the CFR is designed to fulfil the same functions for Romani. Based on the first four proficiency levels of the CEFR (A1, A2, B1, B2), it defines proficiency in relation to eleven themes: Myself and my family; The house/caravan and its activities; My community; Roma crafts and occupations; Festivals and celebrations; At school; Travel and transport; Food and clothes; Time, seasons and weather; Nature and animals; Hobbies and the arts. Also in 2008, the Council of Europe published two versions of the ELP, for learners of Romani aged 6–11 and 11–16. The checklists of “I can” descriptors in these ELPs are based on the eleven themes of the CFR.⁸ From 2011 to 2013 the QualiRom project, funded by the European Union and hosted by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), developed teaching/learning materials based on the CFR in six Romani varieties/dialect clusters: Arlije, East Slovak, Finnish, Gurbet, Lovara and Kalderaš.⁹ Since 2015 further support has been provided by the ECML’s QualiRom Training & Consultancy. To date, two-day seminars have been held in Slovenia (July 2015, March 2019), Serbia (September 2017) and Slovakia (April 2018) and a half-day seminar in Austria (May 2016).

Thus, the Council of Europe already supports the teaching and learning of varieties of Romani with instruments that focus on language use and are designed to support the development of social agency and learner autonomy.

⁶ Ibid., p.43.

⁷ CEFR, p.1.

⁸ The CFR and the two ELPs are available in seven languages from the Council of Europe’s website: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/language-policy/romani>.

⁹ Available at <http://qualirom.uni-graz.at>.

6 Plurilingualism as an overarching educational goal

The CEFR distinguishes between multilingualism as the presence of two or more languages in a community and plurilingualism as the individual's capacity to communicate in two or more languages. It also distinguishes between individual multilingualism and plurilingualism. It defines individual multilingualism as the knowledge of a number of languages taught, learned and used in isolation from one another (the tradition in most education systems), whereas plurilingualism is "a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact".¹⁰ In accordance with this definition, the Council of Europe's concept of plurilingual and intercultural education entails that the language of schooling and second/foreign languages of the curriculum should be taught in such a way that each learner develops an integrated linguistic repertoire; the repertoires of learners from minority and immigrant communities, of course, include their home or heritage language. To date, the concept of plurilingual education has not been widely taken up, but it is especially relevant to the educational inclusion of children and adolescents from linguistic minorities, including Roma who speak a variety of Romani at home and/or are not able to communicate fluently in the language of schooling. In particular, the concept of plurilingual education suggests a way of including minority languages in the life of the classroom without formally teaching them, as the following example from Ireland shows.

In recent decades Ireland has experienced unprecedented levels of immigration, which means that the education system faces the challenge of integrating children and adolescents whose home language is neither English nor Irish. A girls' primary school in one of Dublin's western suburbs faces an especially acute version of the challenge: some 80 per cent of its 320 pupils come from immigrant families; most of them have little English when they start school at the age of four and a half; and between them they have more than 50 home languages. Clearly, this level of diversity makes it impossible to offer each immigrant pupil instruction in her home language. The school nevertheless decided that it must find a role for immigrant languages in the life of the school, inside the classroom as well as outside. After all, each pupil's home language is central to her sense of identity, it is her default inner voice and her primary cognitive tool. To ask her to leave it outside the school gate is thus to infringe a fundamental human right and at the same time to constrain her learning.

The school resolved the problem by encouraging pupils from immigrant families to use their home language for whatever purposes seemed to them appropriate. In Junior Infants, four- and five-year-old immigrant pupils learn to count, add and play action games in English, Irish (the obligatory second language of the curriculum) and their home languages. From the same early age, they are invited to tell the rest of the class how they express key curriculum concepts in their home language. Sometimes they have to ask their parents for the words in question – days of the week, perhaps, or months of the year. As pupils move up the school, they are repeatedly invited to make linguistic comparisons between English, Irish and their home language. In this way their home language is always activated in their minds and their identity is fully implicated

¹⁰ CEFR, p.4.

in the educational process. With support from their parents, moreover, immigrant pupils transfer their gradually developing literacy skills from English and Irish to their home language, producing texts with the same thematic content in English, Irish and their home language. This provides native-born Irish students with a strong motivation to adopt Irish as their “home language”.

The results of this approach are extremely positive. Immigrant and indigenous Irish pupils alike develop high levels of age-appropriate plurilingual literacy, an unusually sophisticated degree of language awareness, an unusual enthusiasm for speaking and writing Irish, and from an early age, the capacity to undertake ambitious autonomous learning projects with a linguistic focus. For example, a class of seven-year-olds decided to translate the chorus of the song “It’s a Small World” into all the languages present in the class and used their time in the school yard to teach one another all the versions; they were then able to sing the chorus in eleven languages. And a twelve-year-old pupil taught herself Spanish using two textbooks she found in the school library and various internet resources; when the principal retired, the pupil wrote her a letter of good wishes that was half in Spanish and half in English. The school has no access to special resources; its pupils nevertheless perform above the national average in the standardized tests of maths and English that they take annually from First Class (6+ years old) to Sixth Class (11+ years old).¹¹

This version of plurilingual education has two obvious lessons for those responsible for the educational inclusion of Romani children and adolescents. The inclusion of all available languages in every lesson ensures the inclusion of the speakers of those languages; at the same time, it gives speakers of the dominant language an unparalleled education in multilingualism.

7 Five principles to guide the educational inclusion of Romani children and adolescents

From sections 1–6 it is possible to derive five general principles to guide the educational inclusion of Romani children and adults:

- *Principle 1 – The educational inclusion of Romani children and adolescents is a fundamental human right that should be given priority by Council of Europe member states.*
From a human rights perspective, there are two reasons why the Romani language should play a central role in the education of Romani children and adolescents:
 - i. a policy of inclusion implies recognition of distinctive Romani identities, and those are partly shaped by the Romani language, either currently or historically (Romani culture and history should provide much of the content of language classes);

¹¹ For an overview of the school’s language education policy and its implementation, see D. Little and D. Kirwan, “Translanguaging as a key to educational success”, in P. Van Avermaet, S. Slembrouk, K. Van Gorp, S. Sierens & K. Maryns (eds.), *The Multilingual Edge of Education*, London: Palgrave Macmillan. For an account of the impact of the school’s approach on pupils’ language awareness, see D. Little and D. Kirwan, “From plurilingual repertoires to language awareness: Developing primary pupils’ proficiency in the language of schooling”, in C. Frijns, K. Van Gorp, C. Hélot & S. Sierens (eds.), *Language Awareness in Multilingual Classrooms in Europe*, pp. 169–205, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. A detailed study of this approach to plurilingual education will be published in 2019: D. Little and D. Kirwan, *Engaging with linguistic diversity: A study of educational inclusion in an Irish primary school*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.

ii. students whose first/home language is a variety of Romani should be encouraged to use the language at school because everyone's first/home language is his or her primary cognitive tool. To forbid the use of first/home languages is educationally counter-productive; arguably, it also infringes a fundamental human right. When Romani is a learner's home language it will be implicated in all his or her learning; this should be made explicit in non-language classes, where the learning of curriculum content can be supported and strengthened if teachers make space for home languages other than the language of schooling. See also Principle 5.

- *Principle 2 – The educational inclusion of Romani children and adolescents should also benefit non-Romani students.*

Educational inclusion is a prerequisite for social inclusion, which in turn is a prerequisite for integration. For the Council of Europe, integration is a two-way process that impacts on majority as well as minority communities. It is thus essential to find ways of ensuring that the inclusion of Romani language, culture and history in programmes of schooling also extends the linguistic, cultural and historical knowledge and awareness of non-Romani students. In some contexts, it may be possible for non-Romani students to learn the Romani language together with their Romani peers. When Romani students are partly or fully proficient in the language, they should be able to support the language learning of their non-Romani peers. The goal of such arrangements should be inclusion through awareness-raising and mutual respect; high levels of communicative proficiency may well not be achievable by non-Romani students.

The inclusion of Romani and other minority languages in the discourse of non-language classrooms gives learners from the majority community an experience of multilingualism that is unlikely to be available to them in any other way.

- *Principle 3 – The highly variable linguistic profiles of Romani communities mean that education systems need to develop flexible approaches to the inclusion of Romani children and adolescents and the teaching of Romani language, culture and history.*

Some Romani students will be beginners in the language, others will be able to understand the spoken language but lack productive skills, and others again will have a variety of Romani as their first/home language. If the Romani students in a given school belong to more than one of these categories, they may come from different communities that are associated with different varieties of Romani. If they all come from the same community, more than one of the categories may nevertheless be represented.

Another reason for adopting a flexible approach is the general shortage of trained teachers of Romani. A significant increase in the number of trained teachers is likely to be one of the long-term benefits of the more effective educational inclusion of Romani communities. But if the availability of trained teachers is made a precondition for the inclusion of Romani language, history and culture in the educational experience of Romani and non-Romani students, it will be impossible to make progress. An obvious interim solution, already adopted in some countries, is to employ Romani speakers as classroom

assistants with informal teaching duties. It is essential to acknowledge, however, that this course of action can easily give rise to inequities and justifiable resentment on the part of the classroom assistants.

Referring back to section 6, it is worth repeating that the adoption of a plurilingual approach to education entails that the home languages of all learners, including Romani, are included in the teaching of all subjects. This requires understanding and commitment on the part of the teacher, but it is not necessary for him or her to be proficient in every home language present in the classroom or to be supported by a Romani teacher or teaching assistant.

- *Principle 4 – Flexibility is more likely to be achieved when the primary focus is on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching.*

As regards Romani language classes, the Council of Europe's learner-centred approach to education is reflected in two tools that focus explicitly on learners of Romani as social agents and are designed to foster learner autonomy: the *Curriculum Framework for Romani* and two ELP models. Like the CEFR, the CFR implies that spontaneous interactive use of the target language will play a central role in teaching and learning (section 5 above). It is worth noting that teachers in Slovakia who have used the Romani ELPs report that their students are motivated by the challenge of managing their own learning and enjoy assessing their own learning progress.

- *Principle 5 – Flexibility is also more likely to be achieved when language education focuses on the development of plurilingual repertoires (section 6 above).*

The spontaneous inclusion of minority languages in classroom communication ensures that the speakers of those languages are fully engaged with the educational process and at the same time gives all learners an invaluable experience of multilingual communication. Classrooms where there is a high degree of linguistic diversity lend themselves to learning that is managed by a teacher and supported by multilingual communication in which teaching assistants may play a mediating role.

In some countries it is a legal requirement that all schooling is conducted in the national language. Principle 5 does not seek to undermine such requirements. The national language remains the language of instruction and the principal medium of education; within the pedagogical framework it provides, the use of minority students' home languages supports the development of their proficiency in the national language and their learning of curriculum content.

8 Proposal for a four-year project

As this document has shown, the educational inclusion of Romani children and adolescents presents Council of Europe member states with multiple challenges that require multiple and flexible responses. It is therefore proposed to launch a four-year project that will seek to apply the five principles presented in section 7 to the inclusion of Roma in 2–4 primary schools in

3–6 Council of Europe member states. If possible, the project will include Romani pupils from the three types of community described in section 3:

- those that have lost the Romani variety spoken by earlier generations;
- those in which older members of the community still use Romani on a daily basis, whereas children and adolescents hear and understand Romani but choose not to use it in their daily lives;
- those that have retained a variety of Romani as their domestic and community language.

The issue of Romani students' proficiency in the language of schooling will also be addressed.

The *impact* of the project will be:

In participating countries

- more effective inclusion of primary-age Romani pupils in participating schools;
- the building of school networks in and between participating countries in order to provide a basis for further development.

More generally:

- enhanced understanding of the ways in which the Council of Europe's concept of plurilingual education can be translated into classroom practice that secures the educational inclusion of pupils from linguistic minorities.

The *outcomes* of the project will comprise:

- an experience of inclusive education for participating Romani pupils;
- significant professional development of participating teachers;
- a better understanding of the practice of plurilingual education on the part of all participants in the project;
- new tools for teaching and learning Romani and new methods of including the Romani language in the daily discourse of school, inside and outside the classroom.

The *outputs* of the project will comprise:

- learning activities and teaching materials based on the *Curriculum Framework for Romani* and the European Language Portfolios;
- annual reports that contain an analysis and interpretation of classroom data and an evaluation of the successes and failures of the project;
- a final report that is presented in the form of a manual of good practice for wider dissemination; conference to mark the end of the project (dissemination and communication).

The *activities* of the project will comprise:

- preparatory workshops for teachers in participating schools;
- pedagogical experimentation in participating classrooms;
- the collection, analysis and interpretation of positive and negative evidence;
- regular events to inform the larger school community, parents, education officials and other stakeholders about the project and its progress;
- at the end of the project, an intergovernmental conference to publicize and disseminate the results of the project.

Project management and evaluation will be based on a version of the approach adopted by a conference held in 1989 under the auspices of the Advisory Council for the Education of Romany and other Travellers. The contributors to the conference proceedings¹² applied the perspectives of action research to the educational inclusion of Romani and Traveller children and adolescents in various countries. In doing so, they recognized that every educational context is unique and so demands a tailor-made response to the challenges it poses. They also recognized, however, that action research can offer lessons for other and different contexts. The participatory nature of action research – learners, teachers and researchers working together – extends beyond the site of teaching and learning to the social context in which a given educational institution is embedded, engaging the community, NGOs and policy makers. This approach will be fundamental to the proposed project, which will involve teachers, learners and researchers at the level of the classroom but also parents, community organizations and policy makers.

In the teaching of Romani the project will use the *Curriculum Framework for Romani*, the Romani versions of the European Language Portfolio, and the QualiRom teaching materials to develop innovative learner-centred methods that assign a central role to interactive use of the Romani language. More generally, the project will also follow the Council of Europe’s plurilingual approach, taking account of all languages present in the school – language(s) of instruction, curriculum languages and the home languages of students from minority communities, including Romani.

February 2019

David Little, coordinator of the ECML’s QualiRom Training & Consultancy

Dieter Halwachs, member of COMEX of ECRML

Ján Hero, vice chair of CAHROM

Helena Sadílková, head of Romani Studies Seminar, Charles University Prague

Diana Sima, educational advisor and teacher of Romani

Zuzana Bodnárová, Romani Project, University of Graz

¹² Advisory Council for the Education of Romany and other Travellers, *The Education of Gypsy and Traveller Children: Action-research and Coordination*, Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1993.