Roma Early Childhood Inclusion in Slovakia

The Open Society Foundations, the Roma Education Fund and UNICEF have been supporting a series of reports on Roma Early Childhood Inclusion (RECI). These reports document the situation of young Roma children in different European countries and provide recommendations to improve policies and services. The seventh and latest report analyses the situation in Slovakia, and its publication is timely: the Government is on the verge of investing significant European and national resources towards Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services that would be more inclusive and more equitable. Moreover, the Slovak Government is undertaking efforts to support Roma inclusion through policy changes in response to observations made by the European Commission.

Importance of Early Childhood Education and Care, from birth to primary school

Early childhood is a period of great opportunity and vulnerability. It is during these critical years that neural pathways are formed. ECEC builds strong foundations for health, development and learning over the life course.

- ECEC improves one’s chances to succeed at school and in the labour market.
- Children who are socially disadvantaged benefit the most from the effects of high-quality ECEC, as it helps to offset the disadvantages arising from social exclusion and poverty.
- Partnering with parents to promote nurturing care and early learning opportunities for young children is an essential component of quality ECEC.
Investing in early childhood education for children at-risk is an effective strategy: it helps reduce social costs

Resources spent in early childhood programs offer the highest returns on investments; they are more successful and cost-effective than interventions at later stages. Investing in comprehensive, high-quality, birth-to-6 early childhood programs for disadvantaged children brings clear returns through better education, health, social and economic outcomes.

The earlier the state invests in human development in the form of health and social care, child care, welfare and education, the greater the rewards for the individuals and for the society. This is even truer for socially and materially disadvantaged children, and there is compelling evidence that it is in a society’s best interest to invest in young Roma children’s development and wellbeing.

Need to extend access to ECEC to all children, and in particular to disadvantaged Roma

The participation rate of children aged 4–6 in kindergartens in Slovakia was 77.4 percent in 2014, well below the 95 percent European Union 2020 target. Because Roma are less than half as likely to be enrolled in kindergartens than their non-Roma peers from the same neighborhoods (Chart 2), they are likely to benefit from targeted and strategic early years programming.

Obstacles preventing Roma children to fully access quality ECEC

The research evidence highlights striking differences in access to quality ECEC between Roma and non-Roma children. These inequalities are caused by complex systemic, structural and practical barriers preventing the participation of Roma children in ECEC, including:

- OECD places Slovakia among countries with the lowest ECEC investment from GDP.\(^2\)
- Slovakia suffers from an insufficient number of available kindergarten places. This situation makes enrolment even more challenging for Roma, as they must compete for kindergarten places with non-Roma children.
- The current decentralized system financing ECEC contributes to uneven provision that disadvantage small municipalities in economically poor areas where many Roma settlements are located.
- Kindergartens are often too far from Roma settlements. In addition, many Roma families suffering from poverty are unable to cope with hidden costs and enrolment or administrative demands. Roma families are often not aware of the financial support available.
- Although the Education Act (Act No.245/2008) prohibits discrimination and segregation, it is not sufficiently specific and robust to prevent or reverse such practices.
- Segregation of Roma children within the education system in Slovakia is systemic. It often starts at pre-school age and is exacerbated by the use of culturally biased school readiness tests that contributes to the Roma children being sent inappropriately to special education. The establishment of “zero grade” classes also contributes to ethnic segregation patterns.
- Ethnically homogenous kindergartens can also be a result of Roma children being rejected by the majority population and the phenomenon of “white flight.”
- Teacher education and in-service training courses do not prepare teachers to work with children from diverse socio-cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.
- There is an insufficient number of specialists, teachers, and assistants who are fluent in the Romani language.
- The lack of data collection based on ethnicity makes it impossible to determine Roma participation during the education cycle, or to accurately evaluate and monitor the impact of ECEC initiatives.
- Neither kindergartens nor policy makers see Roma parents as equal partners in their children’s education.

Andi, a Romani teacher assistant, has inspired children and their parents to value and enjoy early childhood education, setting the stage for later success in life.

PHOTO © 2017 Roma Education Fund | Robert Miskovics

---

\(^2\) OECD. 2016. *Education at a Glance 2016: OECD Indicators*
Recommendations for Lasting Solutions

- Increase government investments in ECEC provisions to a level comparable to the other EU Member States and the OECD average.

- Draw on lessons learned and international examples of best practice to develop and implement a comprehensive ECEC strategy for all children aged 0–6. Such a strategy could feature alternative and flexible programs aimed at effective parenting and child health and welfare, as well as home-based programs for children aged 0–3.

- Establish national and local coordination structures for the development of a comprehensive ECEC strategy in order to facilitate cross-sectoral coordination among relevant ministries, the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities, local/municipal authorities, and other key civil society stakeholders.

- Ensure comprehensive data collection on the representation of Roma children aged 0-6 in formal and non-formal education and health services and other ECEC programs, as well as data measuring the impact of different services on children and their families.

- Ensure that public funding dedicated to increasing kindergarten capacity supports ethnically and socially mixed kindergartens.

- Take urgent parallel action to address community health and the housing and utility infrastructure of marginalized Roma settlements.

- Make kindergartens accessible and affordable for all; expand free pre-school education for at least two years before the start of schooling.

- Stop the practice of school readiness testing and the further establishment of zero classes.

- Increase state funding for teacher assistants and support professional staff in kindergartens, particularly those working with the most disadvantaged communities.

- Include compulsory courses on inclusive practice, intercultural education and effective communication with parents in all teacher education programs (initial and in-service).

- Recognise families as key actors in all ECEC policies and national projects; ensure appropriate information and communication with parents; and promote their active participation at all levels.

- Support intergenerational learning; kindergartens should engage more purposefully with parents and the wider community.