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Roma school mediators and the bilingualism of Roma students

Streszczenie: Artykuł omawia zagadnienia edukacji dzieci romskich w szkołach specjalnych i ich dwujęzyczność. Bardzo często dzieci romskie w wielu krajach Europy Wschodniej są umieszczane w szkołach specjalnych na podstawie testów w oficjalnym języku danego kraju. Dwujęzyczność dzieci romskich nie jest uznawana za zjawisko pozytywne. W niektórych krajach (np. w Republice Czeskiej i Słowacji), jeśli dzieci posługują się jakąś formą języka urzędowego, ale nie językiem właściwym, nadal uważane są za niepełnosprawne intelektualnie. Wyłącznie na podstawie znajomości języka są wysyłane do szkół specjalnych.

W artykule przedstawiono również takie kwestie, jak segregacja i dyskryminacja poprzez edukację, rola rozwoju języka ojczystego, zagadnienia dwujęzyczności w szkole oraz program ROMED Rady Europy dla mediatorów szkolnych. W końcowej części opracowania autorzy sugerują kilka propozycji, co mogą zrobić więcej w tym zakresie szkolni mediatorzy, aby zintegrować uczniów romskich w szkole grupy większościowej i aby ich integracja nie była traktowana jako kara, jak to jest aktualnie akceptowane w niektórych krajach.

Słowa kluczowe: Romowie, dwujęzyczność, szkoły specjalne, mediatorzy szkolni, edukacja międzykulturowa

Introduction

Across post-communist Europe, Romani children are disproportionately diagnosed with mental retardation and other psychiatric conditions. This phenomenon has been common since the 1950s, when communist states determined that, for ideological reasons, Romani children must attend school, and finding that they were not welcome or successful in regular, majority schools, where the national language was both the medium and the focus of education (Sokolova, 2008). Consequently, Romani children were commonly placed in special education settings, where their prospects of ever joining regular education classes or graduating from high school are severely lim-

ited. Needless to say, this has meant that the formal literacy and numeracy capacities of many Romani adults are limited, further distancing them from the employment market, which has typically been closed to them on the basis of their ethnicity (O'Higgins & Brüggemann, 2014). To be able to exclude them on the basis of their skills rather than their ethnicity allows employers a shield from claims of racism and is then used by popular press and politicians to legitimate the marginal social status of Roma.

While the European Court of Human Rights has found disproportionate placement in special schools and classes to be a violation of Romani children's human rights (*D.H. and others v. Czech Republic*, 2007), the Court has been more ambivalent when it comes to psychological diagnoses that 'legitimate' these placements. A more recent decision (*Horvath and Kiss v. Hungary*, 2013) regarding two Hungarian Romani boys who had been diagnosed with 'mild mental retardation' is instructive. To begin, the percentage of Romani children in the school where these boys had been placed was around 40%, in a community where just over 8% of the population was Roma. There was reason to believe that neither of these boys in fact met the diagnostic criteria for the diagnoses of mild mental retardation and learning impairment that they received, which would suggest that the examination was biased. The tendency to diagnose Romani children as mentally disabled on the basis of cultural/linguistic factors, rather than strictly psychological grounds, had been acknowledged in Hungarian educational law since the 1970s, and safeguards were in place. But that had not substantially changed the psychological practices of evaluation, the resulting educational placements, or consequent social and economic outcomes.

In this case – like in *DH and others v. Czech Republic* (2007) – the Court was not called upon to make a determination about the psychological models of disability in effect, of the testing methods. It limited itself to affirming that the resulting education in the special school was discriminatory. While that result is certainly important, a similar result in *DH and others* has not led to substantive changes in policy. We would suggest that this is due in large part to the reluctance of the Court, and the educational and psychological establishments generally, to abandon the cultural, i.e. racial and economic class, underpinnings of prevailing models of disability. These medical models serve as the rationale for the whole field of special education. That is to say, the supposed 'organic' origins of mild mental retardation or learning disability turn out to be mostly metaphors for social, familial, ethnic difference in social functioning, categorized as disability.

Disproportional diagnosis of ethnic and linguistic minority, and socioeconomically disadvantaged, children as disabled – possessing special needs that can only be met in special educational settings – is a persistent, international phenomenon, not at all unique to Romani children in Europe. In Soviet Russia, such tendencies were noted as early as the 1930s and became increasingly pronounced in the post-war years in the context of conflicting ideological demands to (a) provide schooling to everyone on an equal basis, and (b) to assimilate increasing numbers of linguistic and ethnic minority children into national cultures across Eastern and Central Europe (Malofeev, 1998, pp. 181–185; Sokolova, 2008). In the United States, course decisions and legislation opened the door to school to disabled children, but simultaneously provided ‘opportunities’ to channel disproportionate percentages of Black and Hispanic children into special education (Skiba et al., 2008, pp. 264–288; Sullivan, 2011, pp. 317–334). Similar developments have been documented in England – where Gypsy and Traveler children found themselves not so much excluded or relegated to the margins of public education, but rather included as ‘exceptional,’ albeit their special needs were not often effectively met and educational outcomes continued to be bleak (Dyson and Gallannaugh, 2008, pp. 36–46).

The pattern is exactly reversed in India, and other less developed Asian countries, where frankly disabled, impoverished, ethnic minority children are not found in special education classes (Kalyanpour, 2008, pp. 55–64). While this might at first glance appear to be paradoxical, it can also be read as an expression of the ambivalence of the nation state, and its national majorities, toward those who are not perceived as natural members of the common culture. In nations like India, where bare access to schooling for much of its population has never been achieved, special education settings are more likely to be populated by members of the more advantaged, less stigmatized social classes. But in countries that have made formal commitments to universal education, but still feature large disparities in living conditions, cultural recognition, social status, racial justice et al., systemic inequalities in schooling are the rule, most often with segregation of low-status children in low status educational spaces.

This is the context in which we confront the situation for Romani children handicapped by diagnoses of mental retardation or oppositional defiant behavior or family/community dysfunction that result in their ‘legitimate’ placement in special schools and special classes, away from their non-handicapped, non-Roma peers. Of course, there are also a disproportionate num-

ber of Romani children – and marginalized children globally – who suffer from serious disabilities of organic and environmental origin. That is the unsurprising outcome of poverty, restricted access to health care and nutrition, trauma, and frequent exposure to environmental hazards (see Harris, 2018, for a full discussion). But most diagnoses of Romani children diagnosed as having ‘special education needs’ are driven by the use of psychological and educational assessment tools – with associated cultural mindsets – that are biased against them (White, 2012). As was noted in *Horvath and Kiss* (2013), the ‘normal’ cultural traits of non-majority ethnic groups, including language use, can be rendered into organic disabilities by testing procedures, in league with theories of intelligence grounded in racial thinking. One chief marker of disability, of mental retardation, for many evaluators, is the inability of Romani children to use the national language in the same way, or at the same level, as their non-Romani peers. Bilingualism, or the use of non-standard ‘ethnolects,’ is thus identified as a symptom of mental retardation.

It is not far-fetched to suggest that the most important thing a Roma child must learn to have any chance of school success is the language of school, not just the semantics and grammar of Czech, Bulgarian, Greek, or German, for example, but also the social pragmatics associated with the language of school. This is necessary because European schools tend to enforce a monolingual habitus, notwithstanding the diversity of language users in any classroom, where ‘foreigners’ are only conditionally tolerated, and then not for long if they don’t ‘integrate.’ When efforts to actively support children’s linguistic integration are taken, we can speak about ‘transitional bilingual/bicultural education.’ The goal of this kind of education is not to facilitate the development of mother tongue proficiency or to celebrate the home culture, but rather to use the mother tongue and home culture as tools for the acquisition of school language and school culture. The goal is to eventually remove these supports, so that Roma students can subsist in the monolingual monoculture of the school.

Our focus here is on the advent of the Roma school mediator, or teaching/pedagogical assistant, as a part of a solution of this aspect of the Roma education problem. The idea of Roma school mediators has become since 2010 very popular with European agencies, NGOs, and national education authorities, and has received much financial support, for training and implementation. The Roma school mediators/teaching assistants take on several roles, depending on the local situation: but their primary function is to keep Roma children in school, through some combination of work with children

directly, with parents, and with non-Roma school personnel. We want to ask in this paper what roles of Roma school mediators/teaching assistants do play and could play specifically with respect to the question of the linguistic (and related cultural) challenges faced by Roma students. It is not sufficient to ask whether Roma school mediators/teaching assistants are effective, until we arrive at a more comprehensive and critical understanding of what effect they are producing or not producing. That is our goal here.

The role of the mother-tongue in the development of advanced (academic) bilingualism

The Roma children grow up in a rich environment of oral tradition – stories, songs, fairytales, proverbs, riddles and sayings in their mother tongue – Romani. Romani is an oral language, although lately there are attempts of developing a standard written norm of the language. Each Roma community around the world has its own oral traditions, but in general they are very similar to each other. The children learn the everyday language of communication from their parents, siblings and extended family members from very early age. They follow the universal paths of language development of any language around the world. The way how the parents introduce the words to the children (naming the objects, repeating and correcting the errors of the children) are the same as the parents from any other culture introduce the mother tongue to their children.

There is in fact very little written about the language socialization of Roma children. Zita Reger and Jean Berko Gleason (1991, pp. 601–617) where the first authors studied the Romani child-directed speech and children's language among the Roma groups in Hungary. The authors reported that language socialization is realized through the following procedures: dialogic improvisation, oral narrative register, test questions, children games, teasing, etc.

In various publications Hristo Kyuchukov (1994, pp. 34–41; 2000; 2002, pp. 75–84) described the language socialization among Muslim Roma children from Bulgaria and the place of phenomena like code-switching and borrowing during the process of language socialization of Roma children acquiring simultaneously three languages – Romani, Turkish and Bulgarian.

In the literature on language acquisition and language socialization one can find information on monolingual language socialization in illiterate, traditional societies. Bambi Schieffelin (1986, pp. 525–593) reported on lan-

guage socialization of Kaluli children in Papua New Guinea, using an ethnographic approach for her observations. Schieffelin reported that the Kaluli children learn the language when the adult utters the message and after that adds the word: "elema" ("say like that").

In traditional Roma communities the acquisition of linguistic and communicative competence by young speakers is a task of all members of the community who are competent in language use. They all participate in the process of the children's language socialization, using different oral approaches and different community activities, in which the children are involved from birth.

According to Terence Smith (1997, pp. 243–257), traditional Romani education is a community sort of education. Children learn to understand and read the verbal and non-verbal communication signals given out by adults in their community at a much earlier age than their non-Roma counterparts. They participate in the day-to day activities of the community and it is here that they learn through watching, listening and observing, the economic, social, linguistic, political and moral codes of their society.

Everywhere around the world the Roma children grow up as bilinguals. In addition to Romani (language related to new – Indian languages), they also speak the official language of the country where they live and some of the languages of neighboring minorities. At school, the bilingualism of Roma children is not taken as an advantage, but rather, as a negative phenomenon, because the status of the Romani language everywhere around the world is very low (Kyuchukov, 2007 dissertacyata).

The *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (Crystal, 1997) distinguishes 'societal bilingualism' from 'individual bilingualism', and the term 'bilingualism' is used for people who acquire two or more languages simultaneously. In many East – and Central-European countries the Roma children grow up bilingually or multilingually, however entering the school the bilingualism or multilingualism of Roma children is not considered to be an asset. The preschool institutions very often do not offer any possibilities for Roma children to develop their mother tongue. In primary classes in most of the countries the children are forbidden to use their mother tongue. Due to these actions the children develop the phenomenon of semi-lingualism when they do not know their mother tongue well and they cannot learn the official language of the country either. Study by Kyuchukov (2009) showed that the knowledge of 10 years children in Romani and in Bulgarian is equal to the knowledge of 6 years old Roma children and this is the reason why many

children do not understand the school subjects and they drop about on the end of primary classes.

According to Eva Eckert (2017, pp. 45–58) recognizing the role of home language leads to successful socialization. Roma children being disadvantaged in the Czech society, do not get any support in their mother tongue at school. In the opinion of the author not demanding the schools to consider the home language in the process of teaching, the Roma have implicitly agreed that Czech language is the only natural way through which children from different cultures can get access to education. The author compares the situation of Roma in Czech Republic with the situation of Afro-Americans who must study Standard American English, without considering their ability to speak “black” English.

Racism and education of Roma children

According to some European authors the Roma children are not successful at school because they have a low IQ score. Jelena Cvorovic (2014) published IQ tests results with Roma, mostly using Wechsler tests. According to the author the poor scholarship of Roma children seems to be “due to a mixture of low ability and a strong belief that education beyond primary school is of no interest or benefit”. It seems that the Roma are in this situation in Europe because they have clung to their culture for eight centuries since they arrived in Europe – that living in Europe all this time has had almost no impact on them. In another publication J. Philippe Rushton, Cvorovic and Trudy A. Bons (2007) stated that “the Roma children grow up in culturally disadvantaged conditions [...] [they] are not as exposed to the intellectual stimulation and test taking attitudes typically associated with high test scores” (Rushton, Cvorovic and Bons, 2007, p. 10). Similar ideas have also Petr Bakalar (2004) who stated that “several studies in central Europe have shown that Gypsies tend to score lower on IQ tests. This has frequently been explained as the results of (a) the poor environmental conditions in which Gypsy families live and (b) language difficulties, because a number of Gypsies speak their own language and not that of the majority population. It is probable that the environment in which Gypsies typically live does not foster the development of intellectual abilities and social mobility. However, the pervasive social failure of Gypsies in all studied societies raises the question of whether their intellectual deficit is due to biological/genetic causes as well as environmental differences.” (p. 291).

Maja Miskovis (2009, pp. 201–220) discussing the situation of Roma in East Europe, concludes that Roma suffered racial discrimination and exclusion ever since they migrated to Europe. The discrimination against Roma and the exclusion are also part form the educational process nowadays. Lucie Jarkovska, Kateřina Liskova and Jana Obrovská (2015, pp. 59–96) in a study with Czech teachers found out that the teachers are “blind” to Roma children’s differences. They have the same expectations from them as from the Czech children. In order to justify their own behaviors, the teachers created lists with the cultural and genetic differences of Roma children in order to legitimize the different treatment of Roma pupils at school.

A recent study in Poland (Grzymala-Moszczyńska et al., 2019, pp. 51–83) showed that very often Roma children are placed in special schools after the children are accepted in mainstream schools, because the teachers and headmasters put pressure on the parents giving different “arguments” such as “the child is constantly crying”, “it will be better for the child to be in special school” and etc. A psychological research with Roma children in special schools in a comparison with Roma children in mainstream school showed that there is no intellectual disabilities between both groups of children, there are no IQ differences between the two groups and there are no differences in their knowledge of Polish language. The parents of the children from mainstream schools complain that they and their children are treated differently by the teachers, the teachers will not believe the parents if they send a written message that the child is sick, and there is no respect for their Roma ethnicity.

All these studies used tests which culturally do not fit Roma children and they are biased towards the Romani language and culture. From other side the tests are done in languages which the children very often do not know well. Even today in Slovakia and in Czech Republic the children are tested with psychological tests in the official languages. Based on the results the Roma children are placed in special schools for children with mental disabilities. However, there are not developed tests in the mother tongue of Roma children which can measure their abilities and knowledge of grammatical categories in their mother tongue or any other kind of tests in Romani.

Recently, Romani language assessment test developed by Kyuchukov and Jill de Villiers, was used for testing the preschool Roma children’s knowledge of Romani grammatical categories. Children from Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Sweden were tested with a test measuring 10 grammatical categories of 3–6 years old children in Romani. The test measures both perception and production: wh questions, wh com-

pliments, passive verbs, possessiveness, tense, aspect, fast mapping nouns, fast mapping adjectives, sentence repetition and number repetition. 80 % of the tested children throughout Europe showed very high results in the knowledge of all grammatical categories. In all selected countries the number of Roma population is high, and the number of preschool and school children is also high. Unfortunately, the governments and the Ministries of Education of these countries do not have any adequate policies towards Roma children education (Kyuchukov, de Villiers and Tabori, 2017, pp. 215–243).

A brief history of the school segregation of Roma children, their identification as ‘defective,’ and the language dimension of this history

The language of school is very often an obstacle to the successful education of indigenous, migrant, and minority children. These children are disadvantaged by not growing up with the standard dialect of whatever language is valued by the dominant social group(s), and by the low status of whatever “foreign” language, or dialect of the standard language, serves as these children’s mother tongue. We know from examples around the world that this is not simply a matter of competence, even though linguistic nationalists tend to insist that it is, but rather that even the smallest deviations in usage and pronunciations, deviations that have nothing to do with competence, are sufficient to stigmatize already stigmatized minority speakers (See, for example, May, 2011; Adesope, 2010; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Additionally, the languages of ethnic minorities are very often also the languages of poverty, exacerbating the disadvantage that their speakers experience in mainstream institutions like schools. One such linguistic group in Europe, the Romani, constitutes an ideal case of educational injustice meeting linguistic difference, racism, social marginalization, and poverty.

Historically, and to the present moment, Romani children have had limited access to formal schooling. For the second half of the 20th century, most European Romani lived in communist countries, where children were routinely diagnosed as “defective,” i.e. mentally and socially retarded, and placed in special schools where they most often constituted the majority. Romani children were also placed in segregated, Romani-only catch-up classes in regular schools at the beginning of their primary education (Cahn and Petrova, 2004; Sokolová, 2008). Despite European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) decisions like *D.H. and others v. Czech Republic* (2008), which determined

that this system violated the rights of Romani students, and required change, these same students continue to be diagnosed in large numbers, peremptorily, as “mentally handicapped” and placed in segregated classrooms and schools, where their educational prospects are dim (in Slovakia, for instance, see New, 2011; Amnesty, 2017; Miškolci, Kováčová and Kubánová, 2017, pp. 71–88). In this context, Romani students’ language ability in Romanes – the mother-tongue or heritage language of Romani – is judged to be a liability rather than an asset, and their bilingualism is often interpreted as an inability to speak any language (Hübschmannová, 1979; Kyuchukov, 2006; Kyuchukov, 2014; New, 2014, pp. 165–181).

In 2010, the ECtHR (ECtHR) ruled in favor of Romani students, who claimed that their placement in special Romani-only classes because of purported deficiencies in Croatian language violated their human rights. This case originated in the late 1990s in two rural villages in Međimurje county in the northeast corner of Croatia, adjacent to Slovenia and Hungary, only 30 kilometers from Austria. While the data concerning these fourteen students was typically bleak – none of them finished primary school and many were absent from school as much as they were present – the ECtHR decided only by the narrowest of margins, that unequal treatment had occurred (ECtHR, 2010). While advocates of the Romani cause claimed that the decision made discrimination based on language difference illegal (Memedov, 2010, for example), that seems a wishful representation of what the majority actually said. In fact, separation of students into separate classes on the basis of language difference or deficiency was not found to be illegitimate, but rather the Court found that two village schools in Croatia had not taken adequate measures to see that the Romani children were given the opportunity to actually learn Croatian – and consequently the rest of the mainstream curriculum – in their segregated classes. Had the schools done better at teaching the Romani children how to speak good Croatian, their separation might have been justified, regardless of the educational outcome.

From submersive to transitional bilingual education in the context of the monolingual habitus

Despite the fact that student bodies have become more and more linguistically diverse across Europe, and often ‘super-diverse,’ the *monolingual habitus* of the public school has remained. Ingrid Gogolin (2002, p. 127) asserts that ‘the European, nation state is ideologically based on the notion of cultural

and linguistic homogeneity of a people ... (and) the fundamental myth of uniformity of language and culture among a people also permeates the structures, forms and contents of European school systems.' In many countries, the resurgence of political and economic nationalism – in response to the increase number and visibility of minorities, like the Roma, and migrants – has coincided with increased linguistic nationalism and attempts to strengthen the monocultural habitus in schools. This phenomenon can be observed, for example, in the recent promulgation of Slovak language laws, which serve to further delegitimize both Hungarian and Romani, in all public spaces, including schools (New, 2014, pp. 165–181).

Ingrid Piller (2016) describes the situation for most linguistic minority children in schools as *submersion education,* that is, sink or swim, with the outcome that most of these children never become proficient at the language of school, or in their own mother tongues, especially not in a printed form. Children, like Romani children, who not only are not native speakers of the dominant language, but who also experience ethnic discrimination, low levels of unemployment and poverty, and social exclusion, have the worst educational outcomes with respect to language proficiency, and school completion generally. Submersion education has been found to violate children's rights, failing to provide them an equal education, both in the United States and Europe. In *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), the US Supreme Court ruled that the 'submersion education' offered to Chinese-speaking children was not a meaningful education at all, violating the Constitution. This decision, in conjunction with another lower court decision concerning the use of Ebonics, were seen at the time as a major step forward toward more robust bilingual education, but that result was short-lived (Sugarman and Widess, 1974, pp. 157–182). Since the 1970s, there has been a political and legal assault on the application of *Lau,* culminating in English-only school legislation in several US states by the late 1990s.

Protection of language minority children's rights in Europe has been even less robust, and for Romani children less robust yet. As mentioned above, in reference to the Croatian case that was the occasion of the European Court of Human Rights case, the default educational situation for Roma children was placement in segregated special or 'zero' classes where they were required to – but not expected to – learn the language of school, with minimal to no instruction in their home languages. In this case, submersion education has the added component of linguistic segregation, so that the Romani children lack even the language models that peer native speakers of Croatian, Bulgarian, or Slovak might provide.

The actual bilingualism of Roma children: data from Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Czech Republic

The development of bilingualism in Roma children is high variable across countries in post-communist Europe, due to different socio-political histories and to differences among the Roma communities themselves. In Bulgaria, for instance, children tend to grow up where Romani is the dominant language of home and good-sized linguistic communities. Whereas Czech-Roma children often have parents whose knowledge and use of Romani is less developed, and the predominant language of the home is a Czech-Romani ethnolect, that includes semantic and syntactic features of both language systems. In both places, there is considerable popular prejudice against the use of Romani language in public places, longstanding policies that discourage the use and learning of Romani in school, and high obstacles to success in school. The parents and grandparents of contemporary Roma children bear the legacy of this historical discrimination, and for the most part have not completed more than primary schooling, with subsequently low levels of literacy, or the language capacity in the official languages – Bulgarian or Czech, for example – that ‘native’ speakers take for granted.

In some communities the Roma children grow up multilingually. For example, in Bulgaria among the Muslim Roma the children learn Romani, Turkish and Bulgarian from very early age. In Macedonia the children are even grow up with 4 languages – Romani, Macedonian Turkish and Albanian. In Sweden Roma children, whose parents emigrated from Balkan countries grow up with three languages Romani, Macedonian/Serbian and Swedish. In primary classes the children start to learn also a foreign language – English, French or Spanish. All the languages are in a process of acquisition and not well established and sometimes this can bring delay in the acquisition of some grammatical categories in their mother tongue even. For example in a study by Kyuchukov (2015, pp. 174–182) with Roma children from Slovakia and Bulgaria on the acquisition of the verbs it was found out that some verb paradigms are acquired latter in Romani language and this is why the children do not know those verb paradigms in the second language either. However, this does not make the children mentally retarded if we test their knowledge on the verb system in their second language. Some verbs are acquired by the children later after the age 8 or even after the age of 10 in the mother tongue. And therefore, the children would not know those verbs in the official language of the country where they live.

Roma school mediators/teaching assistants: the history, theory, and practice across countries

In the context of segregated submersion education, Roma mediators (or teaching assistants) have taken the role of facilitating communication between teachers and families/communities, and sometimes as translators within the classroom, to help the children understand what the teachers are saying. Though it is not always the case that a Roma mediator be a speaker of Romani, which limits the scope of their capacities as translators. In keeping with the primary goals of the ROMED program, the primary emphasis is on intercultural communication between the institution and the Roma community. In school contexts, this has meant facilitating communication between teachers and parents. While they might spend considerable time with children in classrooms, their direct educational work with children in classrooms is secondary to their role as community mediators. They have been professionally more closely identified with social work than with teaching, *per se*. But in many places, the Roma mediator (as lay social worker) has given way to the teaching or pedagogical assistant, in which role the mediator is expected to take a more active educational role in the classroom. This is particularly the case where language submersion education has begun to give way to various forms of transitional bilingual education. In transitional bilingual education, linguistic minority children are offered support in their mother tongue, especially in the earliest grades, for their learning of the target language of the school. Occasionally, this support rises to the level of dual-language bilingual education, where Romani children receive instruction, for instance, in how to read and write Romani, but the predominant purpose of transitional bilingual education is to move children as rapidly as possible into a monolingual classroom, and to correct their cultural and behavioral deficiencies with respect to success in regular classrooms.

Vladan Starčević et al. (2016) illustrate the work of pedagogical assistants/Roma mediators in Serbian schools. Their work consists of four basic tasks: 1) providing assistance and additional support to children and pupils in accordance with their needs, 2) providing support to teachers and preschool teachers, as well as to school psychologists/pedagogues, with the aim of improving their work with children/pupils who need additional support, 3) establishing cooperation with parents/caregivers, and 4) together with school principals, establishing cooperation with relevant institutions and the local community (p. 78).

Language education per se is not part of their job, but assistance and support typically constitute help with understanding and communication in the language of the school. The authors report that these pedagogical assistants gave more of their time to direct work with children on educational and linguistic tasks than on other mediator tasks, like communication with parents. But teachers rarely included the assistants in formal instruction: their interactions with the children took place in remedial settings or after school. Both pedagogical assistants and teachers were involved in intercultural competence training, where issues of language were only taken up as an aspect of cultural difference, not as an important issue in itself. The training and general preparedness of these pedagogical assistants, and their relationships with teachers and communities, were far from ideal. Nonetheless, children in classes with pedagogical assistants (mediators) showed significant improvement over children without the assistance of these educational mediators.

We might consider Roma pedagogical assistants/mediators as the school's response to the obvious shortcomings of an exclusively sink-or-swim environment, with their role being to aid in the linguistic and cultural transitions of Roma children from home to integrated school setting. On the other hand, they not in the Serbian or most other classrooms (see New, Kyuchukov and Samko, 2017, pp. 1–16 for example), have any opportunity or responsibility to help develop the children's capacity in Romani, or the ethnolects of the standard school language that many Roma children speak. In this role then, they do not escape performing the work of the so-called 'Trojan horse,' identified by mediation training literature as the most potentially problematic outcome of the mediation program. Instead of being an effective mediator between two languages and cultures, the Roma mediator/pedagogical assistant the mediator can become 'an instrument of the institution, having as mission to reach out to the community with the aim of changing its attitudes and behaviors. While those who created the ROMED program and its continuing development, the Trojan horse was envisioned as a person engaged in a 'civilizing' project in the Roma community, but not as a teacher in the majority culture school space, attempting to assimilate the children to using the language of school effectively and exclusively, rather than developing their own language in its connection to their own culture. There is a long history in Europe of attempts to civilize the Roma – to put the processes of ethnic cleansing in the gentlest terms – through the linguistic assimilation of their children in schools, and we cannot hear the echoes. While certainly a more gentle process than submersion education, with much better prospects of eventual social

inclusion for minority language students, transitional bilingual education, which depends vitally on the work of cultural/linguistic insiders like Roma mediators, does intentionally contribute the maintenance of a monocultural, monolingual habitus (Kyuchukov, 2012, pp. 375–378).

A higher vision of the Roma school mediator/teaching assistant: what could they do, and what do they do, that is most beneficial to Roma students

According to ROMED the Roma school mediators are “the bridge” between the school and the family. In most of the cases they are the people who keep in touch with the communities, they take the children from the community and bring them to the schools (sometime with organized transport – a school bus), They are also responsible for bringing the children back to the families. The Roma mediators got trainings organized by the Council of Europe and the trainers almost in all countries were activists, NGO workers, or local policy makers. The mediators were trained through modules on communication, conflict solving, work with children, Romani history etc. The all program is designed around the majority culture and majority language.

However, the Roma school mediators did not get any training in methodology of teaching. Very often the teachers use their help as translators in the classes, or as assistants in the educational process, but the mediators are not trained for that. In the society the position of the school mediator is not taken seriously, and the teachers and school administration see the position of the school mediators as temporary one. There is no understanding by the Ministries of Education and local school administration that such a position is needed, and it can help to improve the quality of educational process with Roma children. There are even striking cases such as in Bulgaria, where the Ministry of Education is not recognizing the position of the mediators, and although there are people trained to be mediators and have certificates for that they are not allowed to work at schools.

It our opinion to work as a school mediator is not enough to have only short-term trainings. The Universities in East European countries can open new programs with Bachelor degree called “school mediator”. In the programs the students can get more systematic knowledge on child psychology, pedagogy, educational process, methodology of teaching, etc. With those knowledges the mediators could be useful not only to “build bridges” between schools and communities but also to be directly involved in the educational process, help-

ing children with translation, or with unclear tasks, explaining everything in the mother tongue of the child, helping the child with reading and writing and etc. So, the role of the school mediator can be seen also as a second resource teacher who is directly involved in the educational process.

For the time being the school mediators are not seen as some one who can improve the children's knowledge on Romani language and Romani culture. The role of mother tongue and native culture in the educational process is underestimated. In after school activities the school mediators can provide activities in the mother tongue of the children, where they can learn something more about their language, history and culture. It is known that the children who learn their mother tongue and culture are more motivated and interested in the educational process. This can help the children also to be motivated to move out of special schools and to get to mainstream schools, where the quality of education is much higher.

Another role of the school mediators, which for the time being does not exist in the ROMED program, could be, to help the children who do not have mental retardation to be integrated in the mainstream classes. The children, even if they are very good students in the special schools, do not have any chances to continue their education after finishing the basic school (8 years education). With a certificate from a special school they cannot find jobs either. For the time being sending the Roma children from special school to mainstream school is taken as a punishment (Grzymala-Moszczyńska et al., 2019, pp. 51–83). This view should be changed, and this could be the role of the mediators – to explain the parents and the children why they have to be integrated in the mainstream schools and to help them with the process of transfer of the child from special to mainstream school.

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Roma school mediators and the bilingualism of Roma students

Abstract: The paper discusses the issues of Roma children education in special schools and their bilingualism. Very often the Roma children in many East European countries are placed in special schools based on testing in the official language of the countries. The bilingualism of Roma children is not considered as a positive phenomenon. In some countries even (such as Czech Republic and Slovakia) if the children speak some form of the official language, but not the proper language, still they are considered to be mentally retarded. Based on their language knowledge they are sent to special schools.

The paper discusses also issues such as segregation and discrimination through education, the role of the mother tongue development, the issues of bilingualism at school, and the ROMED program of the Council of Europe for school mediators. On the end the paper suggests some ideas what the school mediators can do more in order to integrate more Roma students to mainstream school and their integration not to be taken as a punishment, as it is accepted now in some countries.

Keywords: Roma, bilingualism, special schools, school mediators, intercultural education

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