

RECOMMENDATIONS
for policy makers
in the field of inclusion of Romani children
into preschool programs



INTRODUCTION

Since October 2016 association Center for Education Initiatives in Latvia has been implementing the project **“KHETAUN (TOGETHER): Key Steps To Inclusion Of Romani Children Into Quality Early Childhood Programs”** (*KHETAUN (TOGETHER): With Key Steps To Inclusion Of Romani Children Into Quality Early Childhood Programs*).

It is an international project, that has been implemented in four countries - Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia and the Check Republic, at a national level it is allowed to be implemented in one municipality. In Latvia the project is implemented in Preili [Preiļi] district with the support of Preili local government council and in close cooperation with Preili district Board of Education and the pre-school „Pasacina” [“Pasaciņa”].

The goal of the project is, based on the experience of partners from four countries, to develop and implement a comprehensive model that enhances the professional competence of educators in working with Roma children, parents and the local community.

These recommendations have been worked out on the bases of the analysis and evaluation of the realized project activities and are intended to be a tool for the local and national policy makers to promote early childhood education for Roma children. The recommendations include both content and structural recommendations that are applicable to local circumstances and priorities.

Recommendations have been divided in four thematic groups:

- The importance of preschool education and ensuring social justice in education
- Building trust and connecting preschool with different actors within the local community
- Activities for children who are not enrolled in preschools and their parents
- Programs for empowering Romani families with regard to childcare and encouraging child development

Recommendations give a general analysis of the situation in each of the areas and specific suggestions for improving the situation at a local and national level.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION AND ENSURING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

Analysis of the situation

Despite the growing number of examples of good practice in the area of Roma social integration, segregation of Roma is still existing in the society of Latvia; that is determined by many socioeconomic and historical factors and it has a particularly negative impact on Roma children, their families' rights and future perspectives. It is also evident concerning the pre-school education.

The EU Council Conclusions on accelerating the process of Roma integration, adopted by the Council on 8 December 2016, emphasize the importance of early childhood education, calling on Member States to step up efforts to eradicate all forms of segregation in education by ensuring equal access for Roma children to inclusive, high quality early childhood education and care.

The European Commission also emphasizes the importance of pre-primary education, concluding that the most important role of pre-school education is precisely in the field of social adaptation of children. The EC calls on Member States to invest more in pre-school education, as it provides an effective basis for further learning, eliminates dropouts and increases the level of results and the level of general skills. (EC Communication COM (2008) 865 final, "An updated strategic framework for the EU cooperation in education and training", 16 December 2008)

The importance of pre-school education is also confirmed by the Latvian sustainable development strategy until 2030, noting that the countries that are purposefully investing in the education and upbringing of pre-school age children have much better student achievement and greater social equity. There is a need to create a diverse, high-quality and affordable nursery and childcare service. Pre-school funding needs to be provided sufficiently, guaranteeing pre-school availability for families from socially and economically marginalized groups.

In particular, ensuring access to Roma children is not a passive permit for children to study and attend an educational establishment but is a purposeful and active operation. This is particularly emphasized by the 2009 EP Recommendation (*COUNCIL OF EUROPE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the education of Roma and Travellers in Europe*), stipulating that early childhood visits for Roma children should be encouraged and their involvement in education should be promoted, providing, if necessary, specific support measures / mechanisms.

According to the Eurodyce research "Preschool Education and Care in Europe: Addressing Social and Cultural Inequalities," the most effective are those pre-school education programs, which include intensive, early, child-centered, institutionalized education combined with active involvement and education of parents, and targeted home-based learning activities as well as family support activities.

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Recommendations for the local level

- To carry out targeted work on improving access to pre-school education and improving the quality of education for Roma children, including the promotion of pre-school Roma education as one of the educational priorities.
- To improve the quality of multicultural learning environment and the process in all pre-school educational institutions.
- To ensure promotion of teachers' professional competence in the area of implementation of social justice and the implementation of inclusive and multicultural approach in pre-school education.
- To provide Roma teacher assistants in pre-school institutions with the goal to promote access for Roma children to early childhood education.
- To develop specific actions / plans to ensure the most effective inclusion in the education process and the implementation of the rights to education of Roma children who have reached the compulsory education age and who do not attend a pre-school or a preparatory class at school.
- To develop and implement motivational measures for Roma parents with children at compulsory school age, linking parental responsibilities with the provision of allowances / support to Roma families.
- To encourage the development and use of motivational approaches regarding access to municipal services - for example, to provide the employed Roma parents with the possibility to send their children to a kindergarten.
- To make Roma parents aware of the need and importance of pre-school education, with an emphasis on the achievements and expected results of their children.

Recommendations for the national level

- To develop a comprehensive approach / national program for Roma integration with the goal to improve the real everyday life of Roma people by ensuring social justice in all areas, including pre-school education.
- To organize a round table discussion with public policy officials responsible for education and practitioners with the aim to raise awareness about the provision of social justice and access to education for Roma children at the pre-school stage.
- To implement the development of education monitoring structure and daily routine for Roma students including in it pre-school children from the age of 5 years.
- To implement educational measures for leaders of local government education departments and representatives of school administrations to raise awareness about the availability of education in terms of social justice.
- Educating teachers for work in a multicultural and inclusive environment should be included as a compulsory element in the training and further training of teachers.
- To promote awareness in society as a whole about the diverse nature of society, generate a responsive public opinion concerning the integration barriers faced by Roma people, and incorporate these aspects into the national curricula and teaching materials.

2. BUILDING TRUST AND CONNECTING PRESCHOOL WITH DIFFERENT ACTORS WITHIN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Analysis of the situation

The Europe 2020 Strategy for New Growth - smart, sustainable and inclusive growth - prevents sustainable economic and social marginalization against Roma people which is the largest minority in Europe. Decisive action is needed at both national and the EU level in the context of active dialogue with the Roma. Although the main responsibility for this action lies with the public authorities, it still remains a problem, keeping in mind that the social and economic integration of the Roma is a two-way process that requires a change in attitudes and active involvement of the majority of the population as well as members of Roma community, and here the investment can directly be provided by educational institutions.

Provision of pre-school education and care requires cooperation between the institutions that provide these services, parents, the local community and public administration institutions in order to maximize the matching of services to the needs of the child and the family. Consequently, the role of educational institutions in building cooperation and trust increases - educational institutions must take on the role of social networking centers and stimulate new forms of action and cooperation.

The characteristic feature of the situation in Latvia is that the problem of education is not considered to be the problem of society, and concerns to everyone who care for the future of their children. Therefore, the teacher must be not only a professional, but also a versatile person who helps, inspires, links different areas, collaborates, gives advice and organizes. Since pre-school is the first stage in the education of children, pre-school teachers in particular need to be provided with an offer of the educational programs that develop different competences, including building positive relations with Roma community and overcoming barriers.

To overcome the barriers of Roma ethnic culture, social conditions and those created by community, a positive experience should be formed already during the pre-school age. Pre-school teachers must be able to create friendly and credible environment for Roma families, by using the information channels which are accessible and understandable to Roma community and by offering to early-age Roma children a new educational experience and a practical opportunity to be integrated into inclusive and multicultural education setting.

Recommendations for the local level

- To develop a mechanism for recording the pre-school age Roma children to identify those Roma children who do not attend pre-school education institutions.
- To provide Roma teacher assistants in pre-schools with the goal to foster trust and cooperation between Roma parents and the educational institution.
- To promote the professional development of pre-school educators with the goal to develop methods and techniques for developing a meaningful and positive relationship with Roma community and local community institutions, as well as raising awareness about the benefits of Roma integration.
- To provide support for pre-school educators, including financial support, to work with Roma families to build trust and inform about the role of pre-school education in children's development, and to work with Roma children in the area of the implementation of inclusive education and the expansion of Roma family involvement.
- To educate administrators of pre-school educational institutions and other local government employees who work with Roma community and encourage them to use the "similar for similar" principle - communication and circulation of information in an easy-to-grasp and understandable language.
- To encourage pre-schools (and also schools) to cooperate more actively with non-governmental organizations that have experience in work with Roma families with children, including the use of their services.
- To promote professional cooperation between local authorities and NGOs in various fields related to the socioeconomic development opportunities of Roma community, in particular through cooperation and support for the projects aimed at contributing to development of confidence-building processes between Roma and other local communities at all levels.

Recommendations for the national level

- To organize a round table discussion with national policy officials and practitioners responsible for education issues with the aim of developing support mechanisms to promote greater involvement of Roma children and their more effective inclusion in pre-primary education.
- To encourage Roma parents to have greater motivation for their children to access high-quality early-stage pre-school education in order to overcome the educational difficulties faced by Roma children at school.
- To encourage municipalities to make more active use of the EU Structural Funds and other financial resources to support and motivate Roma parents to start early education of their children in pre-schools.
- To support and stimulate the civil society activities that empowers cooperation and mutual understanding among different ethnic groups, in particular with Roma minority, by encouraging the involvement of socially inactive people and their participation in development of regional communities and national policies.
- Regularly collect and disseminate examples of positive contribution of Roma representatives to the development of the country in different areas and at various levels.
- To implement effective measures to combat rhetoric and hate speech against Roma.
- To identify and promote the latest and most effective strategies for promoting learning as well as information on inclusive types of out-of-school activities, with the goal to promote inclusion and engagement of Roma children and their families in education and society.

3. ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE NOT ENROLLED IN PRESCHOOLS AND THEIR PARENTS

Analysis of the situation

In almost all European countries, including in Latvia, Roma ethnic minority is a serious social problem, and Roma children are mostly the children left outside the education system. This leads to the stratification of society, as there are limited opportunities for less educated young people to find job or continue their education. About 10 000 Roma people live in Latvia, and this community is recognized as one of the most socially disadvantaged and most discriminated groups.

Latvian legislation states that parents (custodians) are responsible for ensuring that the child receives compulsory education (preparation for starting primary school is from the age of 5 and the acquisition of primary education or continuation of acquiring primary education until the age of 18). The independent research "Implementation of the National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy Guidelines 2012-2018" implementation in 2012-2014 (BISS, 2015) has identified the three main trends that still characterize the Roma as marginal and socially excluded group: 1) low level of education (only 34% of Roma have finished primary schools and 17.2% of them have higher education than primary), 2) the number of the employed Roma people is three times lower than the average in Latvian society, and the proportion of the long-term unemployed Roma is clearly dominating among all the others (Latvia Facts, 2015). These core tendencies pose a serious threat to the timely acquisition of compulsory education by Roma children, ability to learn successfully by receiving parental support and learning assistance and to continue their studies.

The Education Law (Article 17) provides the competence of local governments in education, indicating that municipalities register children of compulsory school age in accordance with the procedures specified by the Cabinet of Ministers (Cabinet Regulation No 871 "Procedure for the Registration of Children who Have Commenced the Education Age") and in cooperation with the State Social Insurance Agency Branch, the municipal registry office and the police department check which children do not attend educational establishments, identify the children's place of residence and address the issue of their school attendance.

Roma population outside the declared place of residence, the lack of information in local governments on the location of the children and the educational institution they attend / do not attend, prejudice and segregation in educational institutions related to Roma families, and the disproportionately large number of Roma children sent to special schools require the community to draw attention to this issue and look for ways to change this situation.

Recommendations for the local level

- To expand opportunities and offers for Roma families with children who are not enrolled in pre-schools, providing free access to interest education and organizing and financing activities to promote the general development of Roma children.
- To encourage educational institutions to organize educational and inclusive events or activities aimed at encouraging Roma families to focus on children's education, building trust in institutional staff, and provoking desire to engage in community life.
- To identify families whose children are not enrolled in pre-schools and invite these families to educational and inclusive activities, in such a way building trust and understanding about the importance and benefits of pre-school education for the child and the family.
- To find an opportunity to hire (as a paid work) Roma teacher assistants in educational institutions where Roma children study; include in teacher assistants' duties not only support for children, but also cooperation with families and support for parents.
- To implement educational activities for parents and inform them how they can contribute to their children's development and improvement of their learning skills.
- To provide opportunity for Roma children to borrow children's books, development games, etc. for a certain period of time from an educational institution.
- To provide opportunity for teachers who work with Roma children and families to have funding for at least 6 hours of professional development programs on multicultural education issues.

Recommendations for the national level

- To introduce the responsible government personnel to international research and activities aimed at Roma families whose children are not enrolled in the education system.
- At national level encourage to expand opportunities and offers for free access to interest education to promote of the general development of Roma children.
- To develop a cooperation mechanism among the responsible state institutions and local governments, which would allow local governments to identify children's location and if the children at the compulsory school age are enrolled in schools - those who have not left the country but do not live in the declared place of residence.
- To develop a mechanism to ensure the implementation of Population Register Act norm specified in Section 15, Paragraph 2, which allows to identify children's place of living and the compulsory education institution they are enrolled in- those who have been declared in the territory of Latvia but who have left the country. Currently, municipalities do not have documented information about children's place of living and their enrollment in schools.

4. PROGRAMS FOR EMPOWERING ROMANI FAMILIES WITH REGARD TO CHILDCARE AND ENCOURAGING CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Analysis of the situation.

Although there is a diversity of cultures in Latvia, it is insufficiently represented in the public space. Such a lack of balance can become the main cause of intolerance. To overcome intolerance two things are needed: the fundamental human rights and freedoms enshrined in international and national law must be respected and people's attitude to any kind of prejudice must be changed.

It is undeniable that education is one of the most effective means to achieve this, as confirmed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, stating: "The purpose of education is to promote understanding, tolerance and friendship between nations, races and religious groups." In the modern age of information and communication technologies, formal education cannot achieve this goal by itself. It takes a life-long learning from early childhood to old age to improve the dignity and tolerance to diversity among the inhabitants of Latvia, in order to realize that intolerance and discrimination create a sense of insecurity and tension and also hinder the development of the country as a whole, meanwhile cultural diversity can become an opportunity for mutual enrichment and perfection.

The impact of family background and culture on children's education, the principles of good quality childcare, activities to encourage children's cognitive development, the use of environmental elements to promote child development are just a few issues of adult education that are relevant to everyone, but especially to of Roma parents concerning their children's education and well-being. The offer and implementation of various educational programs for empowering Roma families to promote the care and development of Roma children increase equal opportunities for Roma children to receive high-quality early childhood education and care, as well as tolerance in such a way reducing stereotypes and prejudices in society.

In Latvia, the offer of classes for parents is more aimed at informing pregnant women and new mothers about the care and nursing of infants. It is quite extensive, but the lessons are for a fee or just separate short-term project activities are for free. The lesson offer for parents whose children are older than 1.5 - 3 years is very limited: activities are mainly offered to children, not parents or families and they usually are paid services. Only in the context of individual projects, talking with the Roma parents about the promotion of children's development, there are discussions also about cultural diversity and tolerance.

As indicated in the 2016 Comparative Study, supported by European Commission, on teacher training to work with students who are different from the majority, it is not enough with the Bachelor programs implemented by higher education institutions to enable teachers to acquire the competences needed to work in an ethnically diverse environment with children and adults. This might be a risk to the implementation of quality programs for parents of different ethnic groups.

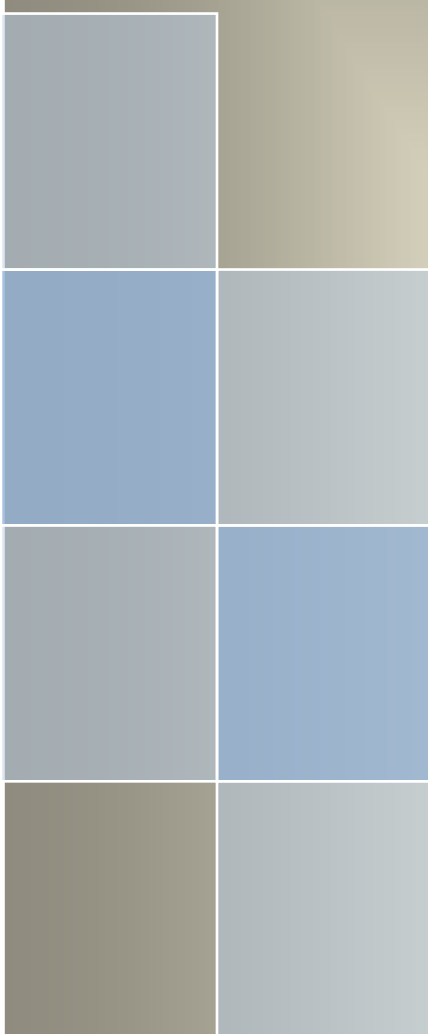
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Recommendations for the local level

- By involving the relevant municipal institutions to find the opportunity to develop, finance and implement programs to empower Roma families in order to increase their ability to care for their children and their development; the programs should include the issues of education, health, social support, rights and responsibilities for children and parents, etc..
- To collaborate with a specific Roma community representative - a mediator - for more effective two-way communication, for identifying the needs of Roma parents, for informing Roma parents about various issues, including education issues, and for organizing wider cooperation with the Roma community.
- To find the opportunity to pay a minimum of 6 hours of professional development program for the teachers who work with Roma children and families on multicultural education issues, with particular emphasis on building co-operation with Roma parents.
- To promote the education of Roma parents in the areas of childcare and children's development. To invite Roma parents to attend free parent educating events at preschools.
- To encourage educators to learn working methods and techniques to work with people from different cultural backgrounds, including Roma parents.
- To initiate and implement measures to raise self-esteem of Roma children and parents so that they do not deny their nationality and do not feel shy about it.
- To encourage local authorities, pre-school educational institutions and NGOs with experience in work with Roma families with children to cooperate for development and implementation of educational and supportive programs for Roma parents.

Recommendations for the national level

- To include in teachers' professional development programs at least 6 compulsory hours for improving the competence of teachers in work with an audience of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds - for children and their parents, both at pre-schools and schools, with particular emphasis on working with Roma community.
- To find the opportunity to prepare representatives of Roma community - mediators - to promote cooperation between individual municipalities and Roma communities and to promote the consolidation of Latvian society as a whole.
- To develop educational materials for Roma parents about the most important issues of childcare, health, education and child and parental rights in a simple, easy-to-grasp form and disseminate them among Roma community.



The Recommendations have been published within the confines of the project “KHETAUN (TOGETHER): With Key Steps to Inclusion of Romani Children into Quality Early Childhood Programs” .

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

