

CASE *study*: SLOVENIA



Empowering Roma families through child development programmes

Submitted by: Jerneja Jager (jerneja.jager@pei.si) and Mateja Režek (mateja.rezek1@guest.arnes.si) on behalf of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) and the Step by Step Centre for Quality in Education (SbS CQE) at the Educational Research Institute (ERI).

This material is part of a compilation of various case studies from across Europe that show different facets of early childhood development, and the types of policies and interventions that we are promoting through the 'First Years, First Priority' campaign.

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FOR *every* CHILD
IN EUROPE**

SUMMARY

The programme *Empowering Roma families to support child development* was implemented in three municipalities in Slovenia. It aimed to incentivise child development in the home environment, strengthen parental roles, and improve parents' involvement in their children's upbringing. It was implemented by kindergarten teachers, in collaboration with Roma assistants and associates, involving kindergarten professionals as well as Roma children and their parents. The Programmes were part of the **'Increase in Social and Cultural Capital in Areas with a Roma Population Project'** which aimed to create *conditions that allow members of the Roma community to escape the vicious circle of social exclusion through adequate investments in social and cultural capital in their environments*¹.

ROMA AND ECEC IN SLOVENIA

The risk of poverty and social exclusion among children in Slovenia is one of the lowest in the EU due to national *integrated strategies that combine support for children, families and work-life balance, as well as a horizontal redistribution of income in favour of families with children*². Parents have access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services immediately after parental leave when the child is 11 months old. The **Pre-School and Basic Education Directorate** of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (MESS)³ is responsible for pre-school education nationally, while it is local municipalities that set up kindergartens and implement the nation-wide programme⁴. The system of **pre-school education** is pursued in kindergartens for all children in two age groups:

1. 11 months to 3 years and
2. 3 to 6 years or compulsory school age.

Kindergartens receive state subsidies and parents pay means- fees tested aligned with their economic status⁵.

From 2009-2011, MESS co-financed an evaluation study on the success of Roma students in compulsory school education⁶. It found school success can be encouraged by enrolment in kindergarten before compulsory school education, involving parents actively into school life. These findings informed the *Programmes for empowering Roma families to support child development* which is the focus of this case study.

1 [Increase in Social and Cultural Capital in Areas with a Roma population Project](#). Official Website. Available in English
2 [Country profiles - Slovenia: Policies and progress towards investing in children](#). European Commission: DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion Website, Available in English
3 [Education System in Slovenia](#). Ministry of Education, Science and Sport Website, Available in English
4 [Slovenia: Early Childhood Education and Care](#). Eurydice Network Website. Updated on 13 February 2018
5 Ibid.,
6 Vonta, T. et al, (2011). [Nacionalna Evalacijska Študija Uspesnost Romskih Učencev V Osnovni Šoli. Zaključno vsebinsko poročilo](#). Ljubljana: Pedagoški inštitut,. Available in Slovenian

PROGRAMMES FOR EMPOWERING ROMA FAMILIES TO SUPPORT CHILD DEVELOPMENT

From September 2010-August 2013, the **Increase in Social and Cultural Capital in Areas with a Roma Population Project** aimed to create *conditions that allow the members of the Roma community to escape the vicious circle of social exclusion through adequate investments in social and cultural capital in their environments*. The project was financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) and MESS with an amount of €3.562,000⁷. The project was coordinated by the Institute for Ethnic Studies (IES)⁸. Within this programmes *Empowering Roma families to support child development* focused on:

1. improving developmental incentives in the child's home environment
2. strengthening parental roles, and
3. improving/supporting parental involvement in their children's upbringing.

The Programmes were carried out in three municipalities with large Roma populations. They were implemented by **kindergarten teachers**, in collaboration with **Roma assistants and associates**⁹ and involved other kindergarten professionals such as principals and councillors and Roma children and their parents. Researchers from the Step by Step Center for Quality in Education (SbSCQE)¹⁰ within the Education Research Institute (ERI)¹¹ supported implementation through development of relevant materials, professional training and and monitoring that included reflection, identification of successful stories and joint planning.

Through the workshops Roma parents became more aware of the importance of education, the early enrolment in kindergarten and how to encourage their child's development at home. Interviews and focus groups with parents in all three municipalities showed that the majority of the parent population **(85.35%) developed trust towards the kindergarten as an institution and the ECEC staff**¹².

The kindergarten principals and teachers involved in the final evaluation¹³ reported a need for continuing such activities within kindergartens. They felt ECEC staff need a supportive environment, which includes appropriate professional development activities and external support, as well as concrete measures that cultivate a more inclusive institutional climate and culture. However, financial constraints and administrative burden were considered the two main obstacles.

7 [The Strategy of Education of Roma in the Republic of Slovenia](#), UNESCO Website, Available in EN

8 [About IES](#), IES Website, Available in English

9 In addition, it is important to note that Roma Assistants hold a specific qualification (titled "Roma Assistant"), and Roma Associates do not necessarily have any formal education. In some cases, Roma associates were involved in project activities as no Roma assistants were available in the area. In addition, they are able to speak Roma language and have connections with the Roma community. In line with training policies, all Roma associates benefited from continuous professional development support and received additional support from the ECEC staff by being included in the planning, implementation, and team evaluation phase.

10 [Step by Step Centre for Quality in Education](#) Website, Available in English

11 [Educational Research Institute Website](#), Available in English

12 Zgonec, P. (2016). [Mnenja romskih staršev o inovativnih pristopih na področju vključevanja romskih otrok in njihovih družin v vzgojo in izobraževanje](#) : magistrsko delo. Koper: Pedagoška fakulteta. Available in Slovenian

13 Gril, A. (2013). [Evalvacija projektnih dejavnosti](#). In Vonta, T. (2013), *Začnimo na začetku: prispevek predšolskih programov k socialni vključenosti Romov*. Ljubljana: Pedagoški inštitut, pp. 297-350.

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

Researchers from ERI and SbS CQE developed materials for the empowerment of Roma families in educational work and the promotion of child's development. The materials are still being used in kindergartens in the respective municipalities, and in other pre-school settings¹⁴.

Two sets of materials were designed for three target groups: **children**¹⁵, **parents**¹⁶ and **implementers**¹⁷, **one for 0-3 years and the other for 3-6 years**. Due to their high-quality and accessibility, the materials have also been distributed in other kindergartens and elementary schools that actively participated in the **Increase in Social and Cultural Capital in Areas with a Roma Population Project** and member kindergartens of the **Step by Step Network for Changing Quality**¹⁸.

ERI staff carried out regular monthly monitoring of kindergartens and developed detailed templates for kindergarten teachers in relation to classroom activities. In turn, kindergarten teachers sent regular reports to ERI staff on a monthly basis. The final evaluation was carried out through focus groups with parents¹⁹, educators and teachers²⁰, and a survey, which was conducted by an external evaluator²¹.

FUNDING MECHANISMS

The project was financed by ESF (85% EU funding, 15% MESS) as the eastern part of Slovenia, where the majority of Roma live, is less developed and municipalities have smaller budgets to distribute to local kindergartens. External EU funding is therefore vital, without which the Programmes would have not been developed and implemented.

In view of the results, there is a need to further develop activities that support kindergarten teachers, Roma para-/professionals and parents. The activities should be presented as an essential component of kindergarten's work with an external provider taking initial responsibility for coordination, guidance, training, evaluation and any other areas that might be perceived as burdensome by ECEC staff. In addition, these activities would further strengthen the role of pre-school education and that of the kindergarten in the local community.

14 Vonta, T., Režek, M., Jager, J., Baranja, S., in Zgonec, P. (2011f). Dejavnosti za otroke v starosti od 3 do 6 let na področju predpismenjevanja in matematike. Gradivo za starše. Ljubljana: Pedagoški inštitut, Razvojno raziskovalni center pedagoških iniciativ Korak za korakom.

15 Materials for children can be accessed [here](#) and [here](#). Available in Slovenian

16 Materials for parents can be accessed [here](#) and [here](#). Available in Slovenian

17 The implementer's manual can be accessed [here](#) and [here](#). Available in Slovenian

18 Step by Step Network for Changing Quality is a network operated by ERI, SbS Centre for Quality in Education where approximately 10% of Slovenian kindergartens are included.

19 Zgonec, P. (2016). Mnenja romskih staršev o inovativnih pristopih na področju vključevanja romskih otrok in njihovih družin v vzgojo in izobraževanje : magistrsko delo. Koper: Pedagoška fakulteta. Available in Slovenian

20 Zgonec, P. (2013). Programi za opolnomočenje romskih družin pri vzgojnem delu in spodbujanju otrokovega razvoja. In Vonta, T. (2013), *Začnimo na začetku: prispevek predšolskih programov k socialni vključenosti Romov*. Ljubljana: Pedagoški inštitut, pp. 43-69. Available in Slovenian

21 Gril, A. (2013). Evalvacija projektnih dejavnosti. In Vonta, T. (2013), *Začnimo na začetku: prispevek predšolskih programov k socialni vključenosti Romov*. Ljubljana: Pedagoški inštitut, pp. 297-350, Available in Slovenian

SUCCESSFUL ELEMENTS AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

All participants including ECEC staff, Roma associates and assistants, and parents, agreed that **interpersonal relations** and **trust** among professionals, parents and children, has been established or strengthened. Overall, *the Programmes for empowering Roma families* have had a positive effect on both Roma children and parents, namely:

Positive effects on Roma children

- Improvement in overall **academic success** and in particular, in the acquisition of the Slovene language, literacy skills, gross and fine motor development and increased social interaction.
- Roma children felt **accepted** and developed **trust** towards ECEC staff and other adults in the school environment.
- Improved **social interaction** with non-Roma children and gained valuable peer-to-peer experience through friendships.
- Children became **aware of other cultures**, habits and social norms and developed overall communication skills.
- Roma children felt very **proud of their parents** taking part in school-related activities.

Positive effects on Roma parents

- Improved **parenting skills**, particularly in the areas of child care and upbringing in supporting their child's development in the home environment, learning about their children's interests and how young children learn.
- **Increased trust** of Roma parents towards ECEC staff and pre-school education.
- **Increase in self-esteem** of Roma parents as they became aware of their value as parents and educators of their children.
- **Increase in self-esteem** of Roma women in relation to their traditional roles within the family and becoming more engaged in the process of early years education.

The **educational material** is still freely accessible at the [Centre's Website](#) and continue to be used in more than 10% of Slovenian kindergartens in environments that include Roma and foreign-language children.

Throughout this process, ECEC staff were also faced with their own **prejudices and stereotypes towards Roma parents** and **Roma professionals in the field of education**. By working closer with Roma parents and professionals, they developed relevant **competencies** and experienced a shift in mindset. However, continuous work is necessary for sustainable progress to take place.

As regards the current status of the activities: All materials developed within the initiative are still freely available on ERI's web page and used by approximately 10% of Slovenian kindergartens.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN TIMES OF COVID

The activities in one of the municipalities (Murska Sobota) are being implemented as part of the Toy to Share, Play to Care initiative. Within the mentioned TOY initiative, parents and children in Romani settlements were supported with ideas for home activities whilst the kindergartens and school were in a lockdown. Partners in the project have also been able to provide families from various Romani communities (not just in Murska Sobota) with basic computer equipment, school supplies, protective equipment (masks, gloves, disinfectants) and basic necessities.

Lessons learnt and Recommendations

- 1. Making intensive programmes for vulnerable groups of parents part of kindergarten's regular work:** Kindergarten principals and teachers see a great need for the continuous implementation of similar activities and for sustainable financial mechanisms to support them. They also see that such activities should be included in the yearly work plans of kindergartens²², making parenting programmes part of ECEC services and overcome any trust issues with the local community. Nevertheless, such kind of programmes should be developed and implemented in the manner of progressive universalism, and not only for specific groups.
- 2. Support the development of integrated systems to address the needs of Roma families:** Integrated services coordinate and work towards the same goal – to build and support parental competences and in turn develop better conditions for a child's development. One kindergarten principal suggested the creation of a 'one-stop-shop' integrated structure to support vulnerable groups in local communities. ERI continued the work in the Municipality of Trebnje through another initiative, under the umbrella of a European project INTESYS in 2015 and from 2017 in Murska Sobota, under a TOY for inclusion initiative.
- 3. Ensure key activities are in place to support Roma parents:** Activities that would ensure the continuity of the project, with secured funding, are the following: 1) employ Roma assistants in kindergartens, which the Government does not currently fund (the State funds employment of Roma assistants in elementary schools, and they are involved in kindergartens activities **but only** during school holidays); 2) use strategies for learning another language and promoting speech development; 3) provide training valuing diversity and social justice to all staff in kindergartens and elementary schools; 4) ensure collaboration between kindergartens and elementary schools to guarantee a smoother transition for children from kindergarten to school; and 5) coordinate multiple services in the community to support parenting skills.
- 4. Create supportive conditions for the workforce to provide parenting support:** According to kindergarten teachers and principals, participation in similar activities should be on a voluntary basis. It is important to foster a supportive environment for kindergarten teachers in the institution itself, through inclusive institutional climate and culture. External assistance, funding and support for ECEC professionals is key in order to ensure continuous professional development and overall progress.
- 5. Encourage the participation of fathers in activities on parenting skills:** In order to involve more fathers, it is necessary to design, structure and deliver workshops intended only for fathers, or more gender neutral, where both mothers and fathers can relate to the programme. The presence of male teachers, assistants, associates and other professionals might also increase the participation of fathers.
- 6. Invest in high-quality training for teachers, Roma associates and assistants, and other education professionals to provide high-quality parenting support:** Last but not least, future efforts should be directed toward teacher training in order to have competent, sensitised, and enthusiastic professionals who believe that change is possible. We conclude with the thought of one of the programme implementers: *"Without programmes for empowering Roma families in educational work and promoting children's development today, we would not be where we are."*

22 A document prepared each year by the kindergarten principal and approved by the Municipal Council. The document describes kindergarten's activities in the specific school year.



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The partnership

- **Eurochild** is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.
- **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programs and services connects the early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA members from 43 countries implement programs and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.
- **European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)** is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organization made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.
- **Roma Education Fund (REF)** was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

Campaign coordinator: Dr. Agata D'Addato, Senior Project Manager Eurochild (agata.daddato@eurochild.org).

National Coordinators: Pomoc Deci (Serbia), Plataforma de Infancia (Spain), Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso (Portugal), Central Union for Child Welfare (Finland), Family, Child, Youth Association (Hungary), Child Rights Alliance (Ireland), Trust for Social Achievement (Bulgaria), Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development (Romania), Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance (France).