

SZÚCS ESZTER CECILIA

**Challenges of gipsy children in early childhood education**

*Kindergarten education of gipsy children has been in focus for a long time in Hungary. Experts agree that successful participation in kindergarten education is an advantage in primary education. The gipsy ethnic minority has disadvantages in the labour market mainly due to their low-education (drop away from primary schools, low rate in vocational training, infinitesimally low number of students in grammar schools and tertiary education). It is gratifying that the number of gipsy children attending kindergarten has been quadrupled since 1970. The reality in nowadays Hungarian kindergartens is that children coming from bad circumstances, including gypsies, mean problems because the major of these institutes suit the socializing norms of low-middle class families. No wonder that even the teachers of these institutes are against gipsy kids.*

The teacher, who knows the primary socialization and cultural specialities of her group, with appropriate social knowledge and competencies will behave as a patronizing educator (Hajdicsné, 2008). Hungary has to face the requirements that people of minority groups set. For the past decade tertiary education programmes started to prepare highly qualified teachers/educators who are able to stand for European level education emphasising the importance of multicultural and intercultural education.

**Introduction**

21. century is the century of multicultural societies in the developed world. The mixing and cohabitation of different cultures, languages, traditions and religions has a long time history; but it became a progressively rising tendency after the Second World War. Families have to face the challenges that the new migration process in the new millennium cause and they need professional help. Pre school education varies according to countries, cultures but it is present in every European country. Early childhood education is essential in our future lives. As Mérei and Binét says late kindergarten ages (5-6) is a very favourable period for communal/public education. The common experience means the base for custom

and later tradition (*Mérei-Binét*, 1985). What happens in micro level happens in macro level as well. The recognition of cultural variety, the equality of cultures and their existence in educational policy and educational practice give the main principle of intercultural and multicultural education (*Torgyik*, 2005). Kindergartens are so important, because these are the scenes of secondary socialization where our behaviour towards other people, culture and languages is set.

The changing social requirements mean demand for reformed kindergarten teacher trainings. In Hungary kindergarten education and kindergarten teacher training has long time history. The 137/1996 regulation of the government assures that various pedagogical tendencies may appear in kindergarten education, as the curriculum allows great independence in methodology and it contains restrictions just to protect the children. In Hungary this independence is present in the different ethnic minority, historical minority, alternative/reformed curricula and foreign language education. But do we have kindergarten teachers who face the special needs that gypsy children may have?

### **Multicultural-intercultural education in Hungary**

I have already stated that early childhood education is essential to prepare the next generation to live in a multicultural/intercultural society. A multicultural/intercultural society requires proper education. What makes a curriculum intercultural? The Hungarian association *Educatio* published its 90 hours training programme *Multikulturális tartalmak- interkulturális nevelés* (Multicultural content- intercultural education) in 2008 to the teacher-training institutes. As for them the base of multi-intercultural education is:

- positive relationship with parents/families
- appropriate multicultural content in learning environment and curricula
- new type of educator (facilitator), decrease prejudice
- equal quality education for everybody
- culture specific education,
- every child has to have the possibility for a similar cultural environment than at home
- importance of cooperative learning
- child-centred education, supportive environment
- continuous feedback and evaluation

Multicultural-intercultural education means changes in individual and institutional levels that widen the traditional school frames and makes the appearance of different perspectives and equal approach possible. The whole school culture and environment must be formed to ensure every student the equal opportunity to active school participation and equality in every scene of life. Interaction among various cultural and social groups is essential therefore school job must be formed. One of the main elements is the increasing of the students' competence that presumes active and creative cooperation. The well-known types of cooperative teaching and learning: project work, action researches and service-learning. Although they are present in the latest BA, MA and postgraduate trainings there are still many teachers who are not familiar with the new trends. Personal development can only be reached with continuous learning (*B. Nagy-Boreczki-Kovács, 2008*).

To be able to educate a minority group it is essential to know a bit of their history, culture and traditions especially if the teachers belong to the majority.

### **Education of gypsy children in Hungary**

The Constitution of Hungary, The Order about Ethnic and Historical Minorities, The National Curricula all contains the equal rights of minority people.

The Council of Europe formulated its recommendations towards gypsy minorities. As a member since 1990, Hungary tries to live up to the Council's wish. The ones that are important in my study are the recommendations on education:

- the existing European programmes for training teachers of Gypsies should be extended;
- special attention should be paid to the education of women in general and mothers together with their younger children;
- talented young Gypsies should be encouraged to study and to act as intermediaries for Gypsies;

If we hear the word gypsy everybody has a picture in mind immediately. The majority believes them troublesome outsiders. Nowadays when their rate in public education is increasing it is essential to know them better. The cooperation with them can only be efficient if teachers are familiar with the characteristics of this minority, as the common belief does not help in fighting with the stereotypes.

Education of gypsy children in Hungary has been full of problems for a long

time. For decades their early drop off was ascribed to their poor family background and nobody tried to find solution in a general, new education policy. Initiatives appeared but there is still much to do. It seems for instance that in integrated groups where different age groups are present the behaviour of gypsy children are very much family like. The older ones immediately start to take care about the younger ones as they do it at home. They spend their time among children at home so they are very mistrustful towards unknown adults but the help of their peers make them feel comfortable. As they often have siblings, cousins from the same age group the separation from the family can be easier in an integrated group (*Deliné-Dóka-Tömöriné*, 1993).

Gypsy children started to take part in kindergarten education around the 1960s' but their en masse education dates back only to the 1990s'. To solve the problems we first have to know the possible causes of the conflicts that may appear in the education of the gypsy minority.

- They share different social values than the majority that makes their integration to the society hard. They become defenceless easily and get on the edge early. Due to the lack of proper education and vocational training they are mostly blackleg workers. Many of them are alcoholic and delinquency is not rare either.
- Family and kindergarten socialization is many times far from each other. Inconsistency, poor hygiene, changing mood is often appear. Every family is different every child has different social background.
- They have quick temper, their behaviour can be exaggerated, and they need body contact. Their family ties are very tight.
- Unfortunately it happens that their living conditions, flat, house are unsatisfactory, the children have no books, and the parents are undereducated. Malnutrition is present.
- Very important problem is that their Hungarian language knowledge is poor as they speak in gypsy languages at home.
- They try to compensate their strong minority feelings with aggression and mistrust.

If teachers are familiar with the above causes they can be supportive educators. Delicacy and tolerance is a must (*Puky*, 2003). A 2001 survey, focusing on school drop offs and prejudice towards gypsy children, among many others asked the teachers if they want to know about gypsy culture and ethnicity. Only 3% believed

it important. Acceptance of cultural diversity does not start with knowing the other cultures (*Hajdicsné, 2008*)? In a country where we have a minority with such high number of people it is no longer a question of possibilities in education it is a question of must.

### **Gypsy children in kindergarten**

My colleagues at the university and kindergarten teachers who I know mostly agree that gypsy families are negative towards their children's kindergarten education. They try to minimize the time the children spend at kindergarten and try to bring there children there as late as possible.

Premise of successful school participation is 3 years kindergarten education. Despite of this fact gypsy children spend mostly 1 year in this kind of institution and they are not regular goers. Their education would be extremely important as their family socialization differs from the usual Hungarian one. Main tasks of kindergarten education are to support children in their Hungarian language acquisition, to decrease disadvantages generated in linguistic difficulties, to teach socializing schema and to teach regular activities that are essential to participate in public education. One of the most important factors in educating gypsy children is to break the strong ties in families. Parents do not want to take their children to a place of regulations and inextricable tasks. In their traditional family model pre-school education is family based. Other reasons of their low number in kindergarten education are their poor living circumstances. They simply do not have the financial background for public education or they live in such poor villages where kindergarten education is not present or the teachers are not qualified (*Fiáth, 2002*).

One of the main differences in gypsy socialization is that they do not take care of time. As an archaic society they do not have time management. It means huge problem to the little ones who have to live up the requirements of the school schedule. It is a part of their *laissez faire* education at home.

General problem is that they do not have teenage years. After childhood they are treated as adults at home and forced to find a spouse. Their peers in school have different socialization and finally gypsy teenagers have to face the problem that they are children in school and adults at home. That is why they can not respect real adults, like their teacher.

Numerous cases present that if gypsy families and the teachers do not know

each other they are mutually mistrustful (Havas-Kemény-Liskó, 2002). They show that there are more problems if teachers and families do not have daily contact. The reason for this might be the intolerance of school towards the behaviour and temper of gypsy families. They lose temper quickly that ends in aggression. But these are stereotypes that most teachers share. They have prejudice and simply can not believe that parents of gypsy children can be supportive in their children's education.

Not only teacher-parent relation is ambiguous. Teachers are not qualified to solve the problems among gypsy and non-gypsy students. Teachers do not understand the behaviour norms of a gypsy and they can not make friendship with non-gypsies easily. This general failure in communication may lead to uncontrolled class and students will be bored. Unfortunately only a few Hungarian institutes started programmes on Romology or intercultural studies therefore teachers are not qualified to cope with a situation that is connected with a gypsy child (*Fiáth*, 2002).

## Conclusion

The above mentioned characteristics of the gypsy ethnic minority make the majority prejudicial that lead to put them at a disadvantage. Gypsy children are anxious at school and it has an effect on their performance. Very disappointing is that teachers are prejudicial as well and they contribute in the exclusion of these children from the peer groups. In the lack of adequate education their exclusion may end in segregation. Gypsy classes will be formed where lower level of performance is needed but with lower level of education. There will be no motivation therefore their chance for a better life will decrease.

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**Szücs Eszter Cecilia:**

**Cigánygyerekek nehézségei korai intézményes nevelésben**

*A cigánygyerekek óvodai nevelése hazánkban hosszú idő óta van a figyelem központjában. A kutató egyetértenek abban, hogy az óvodai nevelés sikeressége a későbbi alapfokú oktatásban meghatározó. A cigány közösségek munkaerőpiaci hátránya nagyrészt alacsony iskolázottságuknak köszönhető (kimaradások már általános iskolában, alacsony részvételi százalék szkképzésben, szinte észrevehetetlen százalék gimnáziumban és felsőoktatásban). Üdvözítő azonban, hogy az óvodai képzésben résztvevő cigánygyerekek száma megnégyszereződött 1970 óta. A mai magyar óvoda valósága az, hogy nehézségekkel számol, ha rossz körülmények közt élő - beleértve a cigánygyerekeket is – gyerekek kerülnek az intézménybe, mivel ezek javarészt az alsó-középosztálybeli családok szocializációs normáit követik. Ezek után nem csodlkozhatunk, ha az óvodapedagógusok szükséges rossz-ként élik meg a velük való foglalkozást.*