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TEACHING KIT

**for Roma, Sinti and Traveller children at
preschool level**

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Foreword

“(…) as regards schooling for Gypsy children, everything has been tried, or almost. These numerous attempts must be taken into account (…). The various approaches focus on two areas: the facilities available for schooling (e.g. a caravan school), and the methods, or more generally the philosophy, applied during the learning process (e.g. intercultural education)”.

(Jean-Pierre Liégeois, 1997, p.118)

The initial request was that we produce a teaching aid designed to prepare Roma, Sinti and traveller children for entry into the first year of primary school and stop them falling behind at school.

This tool was to be aimed at children who, for different reasons, had not attended nursery school and were not ready, in terms of either learning or maturity, for the first year of primary school. It was also to be aimed at children who had fallen behind somewhat, particularly as a result of absences or various family problems.

In response to this request, we undertook a dual task: after reading up on the demands of primary school at the start of the second learning cycle, we adapted these requirements to the specific situation of Roma and traveller children. We used several documents and books for this analysis:

- the www.eduscol.fr, www.inrp.fr and IUFM (teacher training institution) sites,
- school curricula in Belgium, England, Quebec (Canada), Vermont (United States) and Ontario (Canada),
- a number of books, a bibliography of which is appended.

This document summarises that reading and sets out the conclusions of our analysis. Sections 2 and 3 give a broad outline of school curricula in Europe and of the specific situation of travellers. For each of the points raised, comments and suggestions are made in connection with our project.

Section 4 sets out a practical proposal for producing a teaching aid designed to bring Roma children who have not attended nursery school up to the required standard. We shall explain the principles on which it is based.

The conclusion outlines the expected results, and the section on prospects suggests two ways in which this project could be extended.

The appendices list the various skills to be acquired by the end of nursery school. As a comparison, a short, non-exhaustive list of the features of a number of recent school curricula in other countries is also included. We also give several examples of activities aimed at parents, put in place by international bodies and other governmental or private organisations.

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1 Summary

The educational project

Education programme designed to prepare children (and their parents) for primary school entry, targeting the Roma, Sinti and Traveller minorities in Europe.

Direct beneficiaries

Roma families, in particular children aged 5 to 7. There are plans to extend the programme to higher learning levels.

Duration: 2006 - 2008

Team: the ARPOMT association and the Council of Europe (project design and start-up)

Desired partners: Roma and non-Roma associations, other European and international organisations, mediators, national and/or local authorities and other bodies

Design: Association pour une recherche pédagogique ouverte en milieu tzigane (ARPOMT) and the Council of Europe

Funding: Council of Europe, "Education of Roma children in Europe" project

Location: Roma/ Traveller/ Sinti communities in Europe

General objective

The project is aimed at improving the conditions of young children's intellectual and social development within Roma/Traveller communities by, firstly, developing an educational aid for children between the ages of 5 and 7 (working independently) and, secondly, by making Roma/Traveller parents' aware of their children's needs (parenting education).

This project is also highly innovative in two respects: production of an original aid, a teaching kit proposing play-based activities enabling children to discover science, writing and art; and the development of parenting education, on which little work has been done in these communities as yet.

Specific objectives

To develop novel educational and awareness-raising tools for use in early childhood and for parenting education.

To help Roma/Traveller children gain access to and succeed at school, inter alia by targeting learning-related objectives with children and their parents:

1. developing the basic skills needed to start school
2. "learning to learn" and awakening children's "desire to learn"
3. educating parents about "learning".

The issue

Fostering the intellectual and social development of Roma children within the family environment, with a view to making it easier for them to start primary school and succeed at school.

The demands of school and the specific situation of Roma children

On account of their very specific lifestyle and living conditions, Roma, Sinti and Traveller children are completely at odds with school and the associated systems. Within their communities school is perceived not as a means of education, emancipation and fulfilment but - quite the opposite - as being synonymous with a loss of cultural identity and assimilation and an obstacle to Roma/Traveller children's cultural development.

Our solutions and proposals

The teaching kit - a training tool for children and parents

1. The kit is an effective training tool that is manageable and easy to use for both children and their parents, regardless of their educational level.
2. It offers fun scientific, literary and artistic activities.
3. It gives children an opportunity to acquire a background of basic skills needed to attend primary school (a skills record - filled out by the mediator - is given to the teacher).
4. It can be used by a child alone or with a parent and/or the mediator.
5. It allows parents to learn in tandem with their children.
6. It prevents medium and long-term segregation:
 - teachers will find that Roma children with no prior schooling begin school ready and willing to learn and equipped with a number of basic skills
 - the teaching kit should change parents' attitudes to learning and motivate them to send their children to school.

Content

The project sets out to achieve its objectives through a range of activities, coming under three heads: science, art and literacy. Citizenship will be addressed as a cross-curricular theme. The kit will offer:

1. play-based scientific experiments designed to familiarise the child with the basics of scientific method: observation, trial and error, theory-building, experimentation,
2. stories, picture reading, picture writing,
3. artistic activities: drawing, modelling, classifying,
4. cross-curricular citizenship activities.

2 Starting primary school today: the demands of the curricula

In every era there is a hard core of “basic knowledge” which all pupils are required to have in common on leaving school. In order to determine its components, most countries set up committees to decide on a corpus of knowledge to be mastered, which is defined with great precision and detail in what are known as the school curricula. These cover more general, less detailed skills than the American “standards”. The Ontario and Quebec curricula similarly entail an approach based on skills acquisition. This is also true of Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Romania and France, although their curricula include a much larger number of skills than those required in Ontario or Quebec. In England, Germany and Vermont, learning is seen more in terms of methods (e.g. problem-solving).

When it comes to methodological competence, there are a number of vital skills in addition to the three fundamental skills of “reading, writing and arithmetic”. Real-life objects and experiences should be used in order to develop these skills. Curricula for the final year of nursery school in Europe (and most other countries world-wide) accordingly list the skills to be acquired by the end of the preschool syllabus, presented in the form “the pupil must be able to...”.

Education systems face a dilemma in respect of primary schooling owing to the development of scientific and technical knowledge, some of which must be included in curricula: how can this extra knowledge be incorporated into syllabuses of unchanging duration? Something else must be eliminated, but what? This may be one of the reasons why acquisition of methodological skills has become so important in recent years.

IN RELATION TO OUR PROJECT

In the light of these observations, our project will be based on a current educational trend towards “learner autonomy”.

Learner autonomy:

- a) is a skill-based approach
- b) entails mastery of methods and forms of reasoning.

2.1 Nursery school, an educational foundation for basic learning

The main purpose of nursery school (or "école maternelle",¹ "Kindergarten",² "Gràdinità",³ "Jardins de infância",⁴ "Børnehaver",⁵ "Spillschoulen"⁶, etc.) is to give each child a successful first experience of school. With its unique features and a culture geared to the age and development of the children in its care, this school based on active learning differs from primary school in the teaching methods used. Nursery school is the theoretical and practical educational foundation on which the learning that will become systematic at primary school is built and developed.

At this stage it is through play, action, independent research and emotional experiences that children, each progressing in his or her own way, acquire basic skills.

2.2 Differences in preschool education in Europe

There is a very broad range of establishments which very young children in Europe may attend before starting primary school. These are shown, with their original names, in the diagram on the following page.⁷ They may be public or private and they may come under the authorities responsible for education and the school system or be attached to another government department (such as social services or health). The criterion used to differentiate between establishments and classify them in the diagram is the level of recruitment of the staff having the children in their care. In establishments which are part of the school system, the staff responsible for educating this age-group always hold a specialist teaching diploma. However, in other non-school establishments (generally playgroups or day-care centres), the staff are not necessarily qualified as teachers.

Exceptions nonetheless exist, such as the *Kindergärten* in Germany, the *Børnehaver* in Denmark and the *Jardins de infância* in Portugal (apart from private institutions under the supervision of the Ministry of Employment). In all three cases, employment of qualified teachers (sometimes supplemented by assistants) is obligatory also in non-school establishments. They are accordingly included among "non-school establishments with an educational orientation" in the following diagram.

¹ Preschool education in France

² Preschool education in Germany

³ Preschool education in Romania

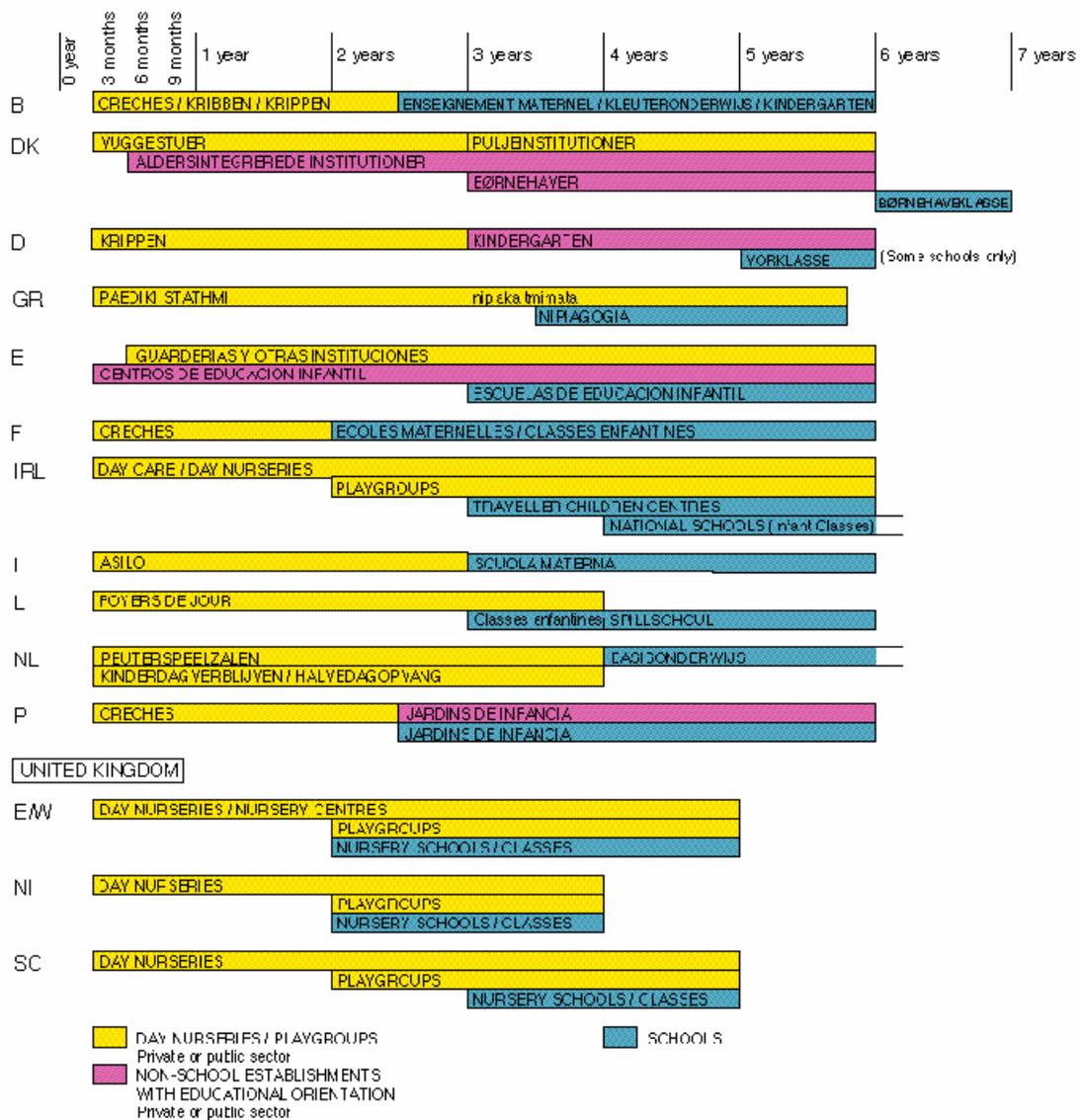
⁴ Preschool education in Portugal

⁵ Preschool education in Denmark

⁶ Preschool education in Luxembourg

⁷ Source: Eurydice – Preschool education in the European Union - Office for Official Publications of the European Communities

Schema of pre-school provision 1993/94



In only two countries, Belgium and France, does school constitute the sole educational establishment for children from the age of two. This single form of provision is also found in Italy and Romania, for children from the age of three, and Luxembourg and the Netherlands, from the age of four. Conversely, in Denmark and Germany attendance at school is not possible until the age of five, or even six in the majority of German *Länder*. In the other countries there are many types of preschool provision which children may attend up to the point of entry into compulsory primary education. Northern Ireland is a special case, since compulsory primary education begins at age four there. In Luxembourg, the age of compulsory attendance at one of the *Spillschoulen* has been four since 1993.

Generally speaking, children are able to enter nursery education from the age of three or four. The most common forms of provision for children aged three to six who do not attend a nursery school are

Kindergarten-type establishments (Germany, Denmark, Portugal), day-care centres (Denmark, Spain, Greece, Ireland, the United Kingdom) and playgroups (Ireland, the United Kingdom).

Some countries have adopted alternative forms of provision to offset the lack of nursery schools in certain sparsely-populated or deprived areas and thus ensure that as many children as possible have the benefit of preschool education. **The most common forms are "visiting teacher" and home educational activity schemes.** This applies in particular to Portugal, Spain and France. In Ireland, home teaching is provided solely for visually impaired or hard-of-hearing children.

1.1.1 Attendance at nursery school

The importance attached to the socialisation and education of young children and the arrangements now made to provide preschool education for the greatest possible number of them are reflected in high attendance rates in most countries.

Families' demand for childcare facilities for young children is constantly growing virtually everywhere. Accordingly, although under most education systems participation in an education programme is optional before the age of five, attendance of an educational establishment from the age of four has become the norm, involving more than 75% of children, except in Greece, Ireland and Portugal where the rate for this age-group barely exceeds 50%.⁸

In some countries low attendance rates may reflect a lack of available places. Where demand outstrips supply, admission criteria have been defined to give priority to certain children. These criteria vary from country to country and also between the public and the private sectors. They may be based on the child's age, giving priority to the oldest children, the child's social background or the parents' place of residence.

1.1.2 Hours

Nursery schools generally adopt the same opening hours as primary schools and are therefore usually open between 8.30 am and 3.30 pm, where the education is full-time (Belgium), or between 8.30 am and 1 pm, where it is part-time (Denmark, Greece, Ireland). In Germany the *Kindergärten* take in children only a few hours per day. In Denmark the *børnehaver* are open from 6 am to 5 pm.

Other forms of provision (*day nurseries, guarderías, jardins de infância, paedikos stathmos*) coming under ministries other than the Ministry of Education (in blue in the diagram) provide child-care for some 7 to 10 hours per day while the parents are at work. They sometimes open very early in the morning and close at around 6 or 7 pm. They are generally open all year round.

⁸ However, for the youngest children there is considerable divergence between countries. For instance, in 1991/1992 the highest attendance rates for three-year olds (between 88 and 97%) were to be found in the three countries where school is the sole form of provision - Belgium, France and Italy. In Denmark and Germany about half of three-year olds are enrolled in non-school educational establishments. Among the other countries where there is a variety of forms of provision, attendance at a purely educational establishment by children in this age-group is low (Spain, Portugal, the United Kingdom) or barely exists (Ireland, Greece, the Netherlands, Luxembourg).

Various organisational problems are posed by the integration of other educational activities into the school system and by school opening hours. In a number of countries there is growing concern about the provision made for children apart from school activities. This applies in particular to Belgium, France and Luxembourg, where childminding services outside school hours are provided on school premises under the supervision of staff, who may have few qualifications. In Germany the number of places in the *Kindertagesstätten*, which offer full-day care, has been increased.

Two other countries (Denmark and the Netherlands) are attempting to solve this problem by setting up specialist centres to cater for children outside school hours. In the Netherlands these centres, known as *buitenschoolse opvang*, are open to children from the age of four, and in Denmark the *fritidshjem* cater for children from the age of six. They are open until 5 pm.

2.3 Objectives and activity programmes

In all the countries the aims pursued by preschool education combine socialisation and cognitive development.

Guidelines on activity programmes exist in most countries, but there are no detailed legal recommendations at national level in Germany and the United Kingdom. Guidelines are often defined at central government level for the public sector, or sometimes at local level (Denmark, Germany). Private schools are generally free to devise their own programmes.

Although Germany has no programme in the scholastic sense, the aim of *Kindergarten* education is to develop children's physical, intellectual, emotional and social skills through play and other activities suited to their age. Children learn to live with others in a social context, to adhere to a daily routine and to follow basic rules of hygiene. However, the *Kindergarten's* role is also to prepare children for primary school entry by ensuring they attain an appropriate stage of development. 87.8% of five-year-olds were enrolled in a *Kindergarten* in 1997. Children who are behind in their development also receive help, so as to ensure that all are given the best chance to develop and the same educational opportunities. Children of compulsory school age (six) who are not sufficiently mature to attend primary school may be enrolled in a preparatory class, known as *Schulkindergarten* or *Vorklasse*. The school authorities are empowered by law to enforce attendance of one of these classes by children who have reached the age of six. These classes have close links with the *Grundschulen* (primary schools) and are also open to five-year-olds whose parents want to ensure that they are well-prepared for primary school.

In most countries the main areas of activity offered are the same, although they go by different names. They include psycho-motor activities, verbal expression and communication, scientific, artistic and aesthetic activities. Mathematics in some early form are included almost everywhere, the exceptions being Germany (where there are no written recommendations) and Spain. In Portugal and the Netherlands (in the *basisonderwijs*) health education is part of the recommended programme.

SUMMARY TABLE OF MAIN AREAS OF ACTIVITY

<p>Belgium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psycho-motor activities • Plastic arts • Language • Mathematical activities • Musical activities • Scientific activities 	<p>Denmark</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bornehaver</i>: no defined area • <i>Bornehaveklasser</i> in the <i>folkeskole</i>: no teaching in the strict sense but possibility of teaching certain subjects (Danish, mathematics)
<p>Germany</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence and socialisation • Play and other appropriate activities • Development of physical, intellectual, emotional and social skills • Familiarisation with organised routine and with principles of hygiene 	<p>Greece</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psycho-motor activities (space, time) • Physical education • Artistic activities • Technology and the environment • Preparation for reading and numeracy activities • Religion and civics
<p>Spain</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal identity and autonomy • Physical and social environment • Communication and representation 	<p>France</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical activities • Scientific and technical activities • Communication and oral and written expression • Artistic and aesthetic activities
<p>Ireland</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religion • Irish • English • Mathematics • The environment • Plastic arts • Music • Sport 	<p>Italy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body and movement • Speech and language • Space, order, scale, objects • Time • Nature • Messages • Forms and media • Self and others
<p>Luxembourg</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical activities • Musical activities • Artistic activities • Logic and mathematics • Introduction to science • Language activities 	<p>Netherlands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Kinderopvang</i>: no area defined • <i>Basisonderwijs</i>: • Sensory and physical exercises • Dutch • Arithmetic and mathematics • English • Self-expression • Road safety • Health education
<p>Portugal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Movement • Teaching of mother tongue • Drama and music • Plastic arts • Mathematics 	

<p>United Kingdom (England and Wales)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artistic activities • Social activities • Linguistic activities • Mathematics • Civics • Physical activities • Science and technology • Religion 	<p>United Kingdom (Scotland)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psycho-motor activities (space, time) • Physical education • Artistic activities • Preparation for reading and mathematics
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In the majority of countries educational provision for children between the ages of three and six is increasingly geared to the educational needs of early childhood, and ever-greater attention is being paid to the development of appropriate educational programmes. Mention should also be made of the growing focus in most countries on the definition of criteria to guarantee the quality of provision for young children.⁹

2.4 Skills to be acquired by the end of nursery school

In the majority of countries the skills to be acquired by the end of nursery school concern five activity areas and are stated in the form "[The child must be able to ...](#)":

When they enter the last year of nursery school (upper section), most children are fine-tuning and structuring their knowledge while continuing their active discovery of the world.

This is what happens in the field of language, in particular, where the many questions about written language that have arisen in the previous years are starting to yield more coherent, structured answers.

For other children, the year they turn five must often be used to consolidate skills that are still weak. This applies to those who have to contend with a difficult environment, those whose schooling has been fragmented as a result of irregular attendance and some children who were born at the end of the year and are consequently the youngest in their class.

⁹ Some common objectives of preschool education are set out in the appendix, p. 28

Division of learning into five areas of activity

- I. Language at the centre of learning
- II. Living together
- III. Physical activity and bodily expression
- IV. Discovering the world
- V. Sensitivity, imagination, creativity

The various subject fields emerge only gradually, throughout primary school. They do not exist at nursery school, the curricula for which do not list knowledge to be mastered nor even set aside a certain amount of time for different subjects.

Assessment is a key aspect of teachers' work at both nursery and primary school. It makes it easier to gear activities to the needs of the class and of each pupil. Various tools have been developed by teachers or made available to them. These tools make it possible to conduct an evaluation at the point at which each child begins to harness his or her early knowledge to the requirements of a new learning stage.

The importance attached to the task of assessing children's progress varies from one country to another, but it is always part and parcel of the role of the teacher or "educator", who must be attentive to a child's needs and difficulties. In some countries assessment is more formal. In France, for instance, a report book is kept for every pupil, and a record of progress is entered in it from time to time. In the Netherlands, in the *basisonderwijs*, children are assessed in accordance with a programme of work issued to teachers. In Ireland, teachers assess children using standardised tests or on the basis of exercises which they themselves prepare. In Scotland and in Northern Ireland, most teachers in local authority nursery schools take stock of the child's progress before entry to primary school.

In Germany, Belgium, Romania, France and Luxembourg a decision to keep a child in preschool education after the age for beginning primary school may be taken as an exceptional measure. The decision is generally arrived at in consultation with the parents and a psychologist, who confirms whether such action is necessary.

2.5 Supporting children through transitions and arranging for continuity

The educational transition between preschool and primary school is another general topic of concern. In some countries, teachers of both levels are asked to work together; this is particularly the case in Belgium, Spain, France, Italy, Romania and Luxembourg. In the Netherlands the objective of ensuring educational continuity resulted, in 1985, in the complete integration of preschool and primary education under the name *basisonderwijs* (basic education). In Ireland, there is a longstanding tradition of such integration, going back to the nineteenth century. More formal types of learning activities are organised in some countries to ease the transition to primary school: in Denmark in the *børnehaveklasse*, in Ireland in the "infant classes", in the Netherlands in the *basisonderwijs* and in France, where the "top class" of nursery school (five-year-olds) is an integral part of the first stage of primary education proper (*cycle des apprentissages fondamentaux*).

The continuum of education between family and school is emphasised in Denmark and Germany in particular, while the importance of parental involvement results, virtually everywhere, in the establishment of parents' associations.

The link between nursery school and primary school, which is not just a matter for teachers of the upper section and the first year of primary school, is organised according to the strategy adopted by each of the two schools. It allows for genuine planning of activities in the basic learning cycle and individualised monitoring of each pupil during the difficult but necessary transition from nursery school to primary school. Nursery schools consequently have a dual responsibility. Firstly, they must successfully complete the first learning cycle. They must also involve all pupils, without exception, in the first stage of the basic learning cycle, without which it is impossible for children to learn to write successfully.

IN RELATION TO OUR PROJECT

If the issue of "individualised monitoring" during the transition to the first year of primary school arises in respect of a child who has attended nursery school and acquired a certain range of skills and where there is close co-operation between the family and the school what happens when the transition is between two cultures and, moreover, that set of skills has not been acquired (the reference here is to Roma children who have not attended nursery school)?

The teaching kit – which is but an initial solution, but one we hope will be effective – will attempt to meet this unvoiced, but very clear, need in the Roma, Sinti and Traveller community.

3 Problems facing the Roma minority as regards preparation for starting primary school

Background

Roma children do not receive any preparation for starting school, where a formal educational approach is still adopted in all European countries based on preschool and school syllabuses and curricula.

These children, who are under a great deal of pressure and often left to their own devices, face a combination of comprehension, concentration and motivation problems, and gradually come to reject or drop out of school. This problem is naturally exacerbated among the poorest Roma families.

Roma parents are not in a position to fulfil their vital role as their children's first teachers.

In addition, the financial difficulties faced by families, the lack of information about the resources available and the poor accessibility of those resources have helped to weaken the family structure from which children acquire the basic elements that serve to ensure their well-being and protection.

Implications

The American researchers, L. Schweinhart and D. Weikart, have noted that children from an ethnic minority background do well at school when they have received preschool education. To be precise, they observed that children who had benefited from preschool education did far better than their peers who had remained confined to the family circle. Disadvantaged children who have benefited from preschool provision are more ready to learn on starting primary school. Teachers have far more positive expectations of them than is the case with other children in similar circumstances who did not receive a preschool education. Children are aware of the hopes adults place in them and muster their energies to live up to the positive expectations concerning them. In a nutshell, pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds who begin primary school with heightened cognitive capacities will find that this very situation has a positive influence on their interaction with others. Since they are receptive to teachers' positive image of them, they will adopt the behaviour and role of a model pupil. A teacher's positive image will also influence pupils' parents and, as is only normal, their ambitions for their children. The researchers conclude that preschool education has long-term consequences, since it influences the quality of the child's interaction with others throughout primary and secondary education.

Expectations

The key is to give each child the opportunity for a successful first experience of schooling, but also to make parents and children aware of the need to attend school from a very early age. Firstly, nursery school enables children to form their personalities and to become autonomous within a community outside that of their family; secondly, it helps children to grow up and gives them the resources to acquire the core skills needed for basic learning purposes.

3.1 Cultural factors

As we have pointed out, schooling is not viewed in a favourable light in Roma or Sinti communities. If these communities are to be more accepting of school, consideration must be given to the many cultural taboos that exist. Some of these are based on the bad experiences of parents, who no longer trust schools. At present, they see the education system as a very grim world of intolerance and rejection. On top of these difficulties there are problems relating to housing, employment and health (see the section on "Economic factors").

Children enjoy a certain degree of freedom in the various communities, and, in many cases, it is they who make the decisions, or test their parents' decisions, including those concerning schooling. If a child refuses to go to school, his or her parents will have virtually no influence over that decision; conversely, if the child decides to go to school, his or her parents will not object and the child will give school a go. But first these children need to have the opportunity to be admitted to schools, to stay there and to have both their individual personality and their culture respected there.

Roma culture is submerged in a dominant culture, and thereby weakened. Parents are prepared to entrust teachers with the task of teaching their children reading, writing and arithmetic, but on no account will they agree to delegate their children's upbringing.

Moreover, parents have little inclination to entrust little children, whose upbringing is seen primarily as the family's responsibility, to a school system that seems foreign and often threatening (physically and culturally). The lives of Roma/Sinti/Travellers revolve around their families, which are the basic unit of social organisation and constitute an economic and educational unit. In situations of constant change and instability, the family is a permanent, stable element. Individuals are never alone and cannot be lonely. In this context, children are brought up collectively. Three or four generations ordinarily live together, and children are socialised within this group, which provides cohesion, coherence and security.

IN RELATION TO OUR PROJECT

In the light of these observations, the tool we are going to propose should be used within the family, by children in conjunction with their parents and school mediators, as the case may be. In this way, parents will also learn about the activities and basic content expected to ensure a more successful start in school for their children.

Rivalry between school and family is one of the ingrained conflicts that must be overcome. Many researchers are today seeking to tackle the problem in terms of complementarity: How can preschool education facilities best satisfy families' needs, while providing young children with a highly stimulating environment? In what way can their role enhance families' educational action?

3.2 Economic factors

The hand-to-mouth existence of most Roma/Gypsy families is often the reason children fail to become integrated into the school system.

Roma/Sinti/Travellers face problems outside school as a result of their social situation. These difficulties must be addressed if we want families to accept schooling and children to succeed at school. These problems are of two types:

- Practical: no place to do homework and no way of getting to school, owing primarily to the fact that Roma are relegated to ghettos: they are often forced to live in places not served by public transport networks and off the school zoning map. Their housing conditions are often poor; in some member states, Roma do not necessarily have electricity;
- Financial: many Roma families cannot afford to pay for transport (where it is available), books or school supplies.

3.3 Are schools ready to take in Roma children?

Where it is possible for Roma children to attend nursery school, they are frequently neither expected nor welcomed, or are given a bad reception. Even when they have been admitted to school, they often still have to fight to stay there, as their relations with other children are marked by the centuries-old conflicts between Roma and non-Roma. At school, they are also given the impression of being members of an outlawed culture when their culture and language are regarded as marginal, stigmatised by words and deeds and not taken into consideration in the education process.

Roma culture is constantly changing in order to adapt to circumstances. Young people's education is consequently of crucial importance, and there is a great risk of loss of identity as soon as it is taken out of the community's hands and entrusted to an "outsider", or institution.

This is the challenge schools face. If they are to be accepted, they must clearly define their role and *modus operandi* in conjunction with children and their parents. If a school's relationship of trust with Roma were to disappear, the latter would reject the school without the slightest hesitation, even after many years of attendance. They would take the risk of ceasing to provide their children with schooling. Roma are well aware that they are immersed in society, experiencing the same realities as non-Roma. They face the same problems, and are reminded on a daily basis that it is even harder for them to succeed, in that they often have less grasp than non-Roma of the instruments that make it possible to appropriate the economic, social, cultural and political world around them.

School is presently the only forum for the transmission of instrumental knowledge and skills. Roma must give their children the opportunity to attend, so that they are in touch with society. For their part, schools have a duty to put in place suitable facilities ensuring that Roma are no longer sidelined by the education system.

4 The teaching kit: a promising solution

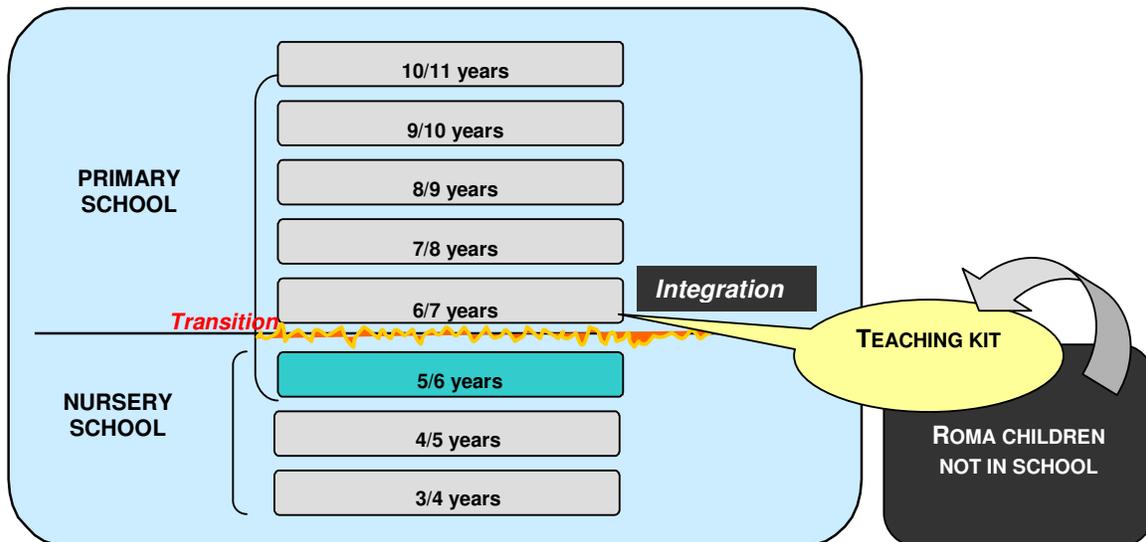
4.1 Role and nature

The first six years of a child's life have a decisive influence on his or her development, future learning abilities and academic achievement.

In view of the fact that young Roma children do not attend nursery school, and that their lack of basic skills when they go straight into the first year of primary school results in initial, albeit temporary, segregation, we are making available an innovative **TEACHING KIT** to meet the needs of children aged 5 to 7 and to compensate for the core skills they are missing.

The kit is designed to ease access to schooling and foster academic achievement among young Roma children, and to reduce the gulf between community life and school.

Most Roma and Traveller children do not attend nursery school. They are mainly children from socially deprived families that fail to take care of their education, which is why the "teaching kit" is aimed at them.



The approach adopted consists in:

- developing attractive, culturally appropriate educational tools (games, role plays, listening to cassettes in the "Isidore and Marianne" series, experiments, etc.)
- using these tools in Roma families, working independently and/or with mediators trained in this task.

The use of cassettes makes it possible to reach a wide audience (since they can be used independently), to target at children (and parents) directly and to demystify a number of issues connected with schooling and learning difficulties (particularly in relation to writing and science).

4.2 Some of the principles on which the kit is based

- a. Learner autonomy
- b. A play-based approach: learning while having fun
- c. A thematic approach: three versions of the kit
- d. Assessment and evaluation: the skills record

1.1.3 a. Learner autonomy

The principle of autonomy is the basis for the development of all the activities contained in the teaching kit: in the mediator's or parent's absence, children must be able to explore the various activities offered on their own. In order to do so, they must first learn a working method with the mediator or parent. A cassette will guide the child and/or adult throughout the discovery process.

Autonomy, which is the opposite of solitary independence, means developing personal effectiveness in a context of interdependence with others, in conjunction with the use of equipment and the processing of knowledge. Learning to steer one's own path consequently requires various forms of autonomy (cognitive, informational, etc.).

However, autonomy is also a topical model and method in educational theory. We live in an information society. In addition, technical progress is one of the main vehicles for modifying the learning environment. As a result of such developments in knowledge, techniques and information and training systems, guidance towards autonomy is seen, from the start of school, as a foundation for the building of knowledge. Such guidance is transforming teaching methods:

- firstly, the issue of access to and recognition of knowledge relativises teachers' knowledge and ways of teaching and learning;
- secondly, the capacity of the human mind is no longer equal to the growth in knowledge: it is impossible to know everything.

This has triggered the emergence of other forms of knowledge (other epistemologies):

What, then, is knowledge, if not knowing how to learn?

The existing education system is being redefined somewhere in between an approach based on a contextualised or organised learning environment and an approach whereby the individual builds up knowledge by learning methods for doing so.

It is worth mentioning two educational trends that seek to enhance children's autonomy:

- The skills-based approach
- The mastery of methods and forms of reasoning.

IN RELATION TO OUR PROJECT

The need to update content and the growth in knowledge are making it ever more important to master a combination of skills, expertise and methods, to such an extent that curriculum objectives increasingly include the acquisition of cross-curricular skills. Our activities will be designed with this in mind:

- Firstly, children will be given an opportunity to acquire new skills (knowledge and expertise) on the basis of their mental pictures and ideas. **ACTIVITIES WILL BE DIVIDED INTO LEVELS OF DIFFICULTY.**
- Secondly, children will be given an opportunity gradually to assimilate a scientific approach and the various underlying skills. **THE ACTIVITIES CALL FOR MANIPULATION, TRIAL AND ERROR AND OBSERVATION.**
- Learning activities must also be designed to give children the opportunity to develop competence in the teaching language: **LISTENING TO STORIES, LEARNING POEMS AND SONGS, BEING ASKED TO IMAGINE STORY ENDINGS, ETC.**

b. A play-based approach: “learning while having fun”

The teaching kit will provide scope for “learning while having fun”. It will clearly be designed for learning, but children will be more inclined to open it for pleasure.



Classifying, comparing, interpreting images, writing with images, counting, drawing, colouring in, making links, assembling, observing, measuring, experimenting, etc....

But also listening to stories, songs, poetry, etc....

To guide children through this voyage of discovery, each kit will contain an audio cassette with an unusual set of instructions that refer to Marianne, a little squirrel, and her friend, Isidore the rabbit:

“Dear children, have you heard of Isidore and Marianne? They are two strange characters who like each other a lot, yet quarrel all the time. Marianne is a very clever and studious little squirrel who loves discovering the world, listening to stories and, above all, playing teacher. Her friend, Isidore the rabbit, loves taking naps, eating, chatting, going for walks and playing, but also... doing “scientific experiments” and inventing toys and strange objects. He can’t bear being told what to do, which is something Marianne loves doing to tease him.

Marianne loves travelling the world and meeting children in order to share her adventures with them. Isidore accompanies her in spite of himself, and always tries to talk to the children, but just ends up doing silly things.

So get ready, children, make yourselves comfortable and discover our two friends’ favourite tales.”

At the end of the story, Marianne and Isidore will sum up and explain new vocabulary, the story’s message, Isidore’s latest invention, etc. They will teach children how to convey a message using pictures, how to build a simple electrical circuit, etc.

c. A thematic approach: three versions of the kit

As we have already explained, nursery school teaching is divided into five main areas of activity. Each of these is crucial to children’s development and serves as a foundation for their learning. Each one makes an active, complementary contribution to the mastery of language, anchoring its use in authentic communication, experience and action. At the same time, each area gives children an opportunity to organise the world in which they live, and to establish categories bringing together or differentiating the objects around them by learning to take account of distinguishing criteria.

We initially intend to produce three versions of the kit:



The “Living together” and “Physical activity and expression” topics will be addressed in a cross-curricular way, within the other three areas.

Topic 1: Language at the centre of learning

“Isidore and Marianne Discover the Joys of the Written Word” (provisional title)

Language is practised primarily through day-to-day experience, but its more complex functions are also revealed through organised situations that enable each individual to discover and structure new ways of understanding the words of others or of making himself or herself understood.

The activities offered give children an early understanding of how the alphabetic code works and how it makes it possible to read and write. It is through oral activities that children encounter written language at nursery school. The ease of subsequent learning depends to a large extent on the quality of those activities.

Topic 2: Discovering the world

“Isidore, the Great Inventor! Marianne...” (provisional title)

The activities offered will teach children to distinguish between the physical world and the natural world. They will give them points of reference so that they can order events in relation to the passage of time and structure the spaces they explore. The activities will teach them to describe, quantify, categorise and order reality, or, in a word, to understand it.

Through experiments that are simple to set up, children will learn to formulate more rational questions, to anticipate situations, to predict consequences, to observe the effects of their actions, to establish relationships between the phenomena observed and to identify characteristics that can be categorised. They will try their hand at reasoning.

Topic 3: Sensitivity, imagination, creativity

“Isidore, Marianne and a Crazy Mix of Colours” (provisional title)

At an age where sensitive intelligence plays a crucial role, there must be a particular focus on creative activities and art.

Children must be able to seek, invent, transform, express and experience creative pleasure. A significant proportion of each activity will be left to spontaneity and the imagination.

In order to help children to develop their ability to express themselves and explain their intentions, the activities in the kit must put them in situations that enable them gradually to gain expertise. They can then discover new ways of operating and technical resources that extend their own ways of doing things.

Inclusion of cross-curricular topics in the three kits:

Living together

Through stories and an audio guide (by the Isidore and Marianne characters), children will learn to live alongside, and communicate and co-operate with, others, but also to find points of reference enabling them to understand adults' behaviour, particularly when the latter demonstrate their authority or, alternatively, leave them free to do as they please. They will also learn to identify and understand the tasks and roles of the various adults at school, to comply with the rules of community life (respect for others, looking after equipment, rules of politeness, etc.) and to apply certain principles of group life in their behaviour with classmates (listening, helping one other, taking the initiative, etc.).

Physical activity and bodily expression

It is at this point in childhood that the basic motor skills develop. They are made up of such essential actions as movement (walking, running, jumping, etc.), balance (standing on one leg, etc.), manipulation (grabbing, pulling, pushing, etc.), throwing, catching, etc.

The audio guide continues to direct the children's work and to give it meaning: "jump as far as you can" (athletics) is different from "jump off something and land on your feet" (gymnastics).

d. Assessment and evaluation: the skills record

"Assessment is a foundation for values"

Bartes

Curricula in other countries

Assessment and evaluation take various forms in the light of the educational approaches adopted in the different curricula analysed.

Among other methods, use is made of portfolios, self-assessment and assessment by other pupils.

IN RELATION TO OUR PROJECT

In accordance with the educational approaches on which our project is based (learner autonomy, the skills-based approach and the mastery of methods and forms of reasoning), we initially plan to offer a tool allowing self-assessment by the child. It will involve the creation or construction of an object requiring certain skills and expertise on the child's part. The completion of this project (and/or the object's functionality, in the case of the scientific and technical fields) will constitute recognition of the skills in question.

The mediator and/or parent will then complete a skills record, which will be given to the teacher when the child starts school. Simple in design and easy to fill in, it will take the following form:

"I know how to..."

"I don't know how to...very well yet"

"convey a message through pictures", "write my name",

"count to 10", "colour in a picture", etc.

For the purposes of our project and with a view to a differentiated structure (various levels of difficulty will subsequently be offered), assessment can serve as the core of a pilot scheme and serve to achieve the objectives: preparing and training young children for the first year of primary school, and thereby preventing segregation when they start school, making parents aware of the knowledge learned at school and familiarising them with it. Assessment is also about making learning meaningful and grasping values.

5 Conclusions

Bearing in mind the specific situation of Roma and travellers, the kit for pre-school children is by no means designed to replace nursery school. The kit seeks to offset a cultural handicap resulting from the ongoing rejection of Roma culture by the majority society. The idea of the kit is also to prepare Roma and traveller children who have not attended nursery school for the aforementioned reasons, and are neither ready nor mature enough to enter, and keep up with, the first level of primary school.

With regard to the youngest children, we aim to prepare them socially, emotionally and intellectually before they begin the school syllabus, and thus to give them a better chance of academic success, particularly for the most deprived among them;

We hope:

- to make a teaching tool available to children which will go some way to offsetting the lack of books in Roma families;
- to work on the child's imagination, receptiveness and cultural sensitivity;
- to provide scope for the child's "intellectual" development;
- to prepare the child for starting school in the future;
- to instil a sense of citizenship.

We also hope that:

- when the child first starts school, the skills record will serve as a means of preventing segregation at school;
- parents will learn alongside their children, and will consequently be motivated to send them to school earlier;
- parents will look at school in a new light and that a dialogue between families and schools can be envisaged.
- the presence of the kits in a number of houses, encampments and caravans will give rise to community action on behalf of children, which will channel parents' aspirations, including those of the most deprived.

Kits will be produced for three topics, covering all the areas of activity around which learning at the end of nursery school is structured:

- Language at the centre of learning
- Discovering the world
- Sensitivity, imagination, creativity

Proposal for extending the project: a kit with a higher, more targeted level of difficulty.

For older children, who are already at school, the teaching kit should consolidate this experience, and could serve as a link between school and families.

6 Prospects: Parenting education

Proposal for extending the project: training for parents

Academic achievement is a topical subject worldwide. Efforts have recently been made (particularly in the United States) to prevent educational underachievement through activities aimed at parents. The US Education Strategy specifies that every American parent will be his or her child's first teacher, and will devote time every day to his or her pre-school learning, and that parents will receive the necessary training and assistance. It adds that parents must play an active role in their children's early learning, in particular through daily reading activities, and that families must have access to the help and training they need to perform this task, particularly poor or uneducated parents. (America 2000, An Education Strategy - plan for the year 2000 announced by Republican President George Bush on 18 April 1991).

Yet the crucial prerequisite for academic achievement is still attendance at school. We believe that a parenting course is the solution to schooling, education and health care problems among children from Roma, Sinti and traveller communities. The course, designed specifically for those communities, will cater for their distinctive cultural features and retain a fun aspect.

Family education focuses on child-related educational activities for parents and social welfare intervention aimed at training, supporting, helping and even standing in for parents.

The family is where an individual's identity is constructed and plans for the future are drawn up. It is also an arena for symbolic violence and incentives and disincentives to social, cognitive, emotional and cultural learning. We now know that "when the family's okay, everything's okay", including the local school.

Becoming a parent is a natural phenomenon in biological terms, but not in psychological terms. Coming to think of oneself as a parent is a process that calls for genuine self-awareness and an understanding of what goes on in the child's mind at different life stages.

Numerous parenting education projects are currently taking place around the world. They are aimed primarily at deprived, struggling families. The results are very encouraging. Several examples are given in the appendix (p.29).

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PART THREE

8 Appendices

8.1 Some common objectives of preschool education in Europe

- Fostering pupil autonomy
- Giving pupils opportunities for new experiences as a source of learning
- Promoting play, action, independent research and experimentation so that the child develops new ways of dealing with the reality around him or her
- Using a variety of groupings: individual work, small groups and class groups
- All non-class time plays an educational role
- Affirming the place and role of the family in educational development
- A special approach to the youngest children (age 2) as opposed to those aged 3 to 5: they are allowed more time on their own but are encouraged to take part in group activities
- Encouraging interaction between children in different age groups: the youngest children benefit from the input of the oldest ones, who can test their newly acquired skills and knowledge in their relations with younger children
- Centralised assessment making it possible to gear activities to the needs of the class and of each pupil
- Reaffirming the importance of play as a normal childhood activity giving children a variety of sensory, motor, emotional and intellectual experiences
- Encouraging exploration of a wide variety of situations and cultural contexts and the use of a range of tools and instruments
- Promoting learning through the use of real-life situations (with everyday objects, special equipment, games) rather than formal written exercises
- Making room for games, play facilities, books and digital media
- Using computers as a means of exploring the virtual world

The upper section ensures continuity between nursery school and primary school. Most of the activity areas follow on directly from those of nursery school: “mastery of language”, “living together”, “discovering the world”. Emphasis is placed on certain objectives:

- Successfully learning to read and write is a priority
- Oral language, through which these two skills are developed, is a key focus
- In mathematics, discovering numbers as a means of choosing, deciding or taking action; access to the written numeral system and the calculations it allows
- Teaching of a foreign or regional language becomes an explicit learning focus
- Reading of children’s books is encouraged

8.2 Two approaches to parenting education: prescriptive and non-prescriptive

8.2.1. a prescriptive approach

Parenting education in Cambodia: the “Krousar!” (“The Family”) television series

Parenting education, a new development in Cambodia, has been promoted by the Children and Development team and the Krousar Yoeung association (set up in 2002), with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Union, UNICEF, the Canada Fund and private funds. This project was developed at the request of the Cambodian Government, on the basis of a preliminary survey of practices, beliefs, and values pertaining to early childhood education in Cambodia. It set out to improve the situation with regard to the physical, intellectual and social development of young Cambodian children (aged 0 to 6) in 35 villages, by setting up appropriate care facilities for 3-to-5-year-olds and making Cambodian parents aware of their children’s needs (parenting education).

Parenting education project: presenting parenting models

The idea was to raise parents’ awareness using the media; it was given practical form with the production of a Cambodian television series (the first) portraying parent-child relationships in contemporary Cambodia. This series was used in villages by trained community workers, who screened video cassettes of the TV series and led role-plays and family discussions. The Children and Development (2004) project team noted that the impact of television in Cambodia made it a perfect tool for **communicating standards and models of behaviour**, making it possible to reach a wide audience and to demystify certain issues without shocking parents.

The topics addressed take parents’ beliefs and values into account in order to promote all aspects of caring for children.

Examples of the topics covered include:

- parent/child relationships – the parent’s role– parental attitudes
- children’s development and needs – health care and hygiene, early intervention, young children’s need for early learning and stimulation – nutrition
- behaviour management/discipline – parent/child communication
- the importance of play – day-to-day learning

The screening of the “Krousar!” series provided scope for dialogue and discussions with and between villagers, mobilising families through a common interest: their children’s welfare. These group sessions go hand in hand with more personalised support through home visits; they sometimes take the form of role plays, card games (using specially developed materials) and workshops on making games for children. Following the success of the “Krousar!” television series, the project to provide parenting education for parents/mothers in rural areas of Cambodia continued in 2004, with, *inter alia*, a repeat of the series, activities and discussions between community workers and families (106 community workers and 847 families).

Parenting education for parents/mothers in isolated, mountainous regions of North Vietnam

In isolated, mountainous regions of North Vietnam, very few children from ethnic minorities – mainly Hmongs – go to school. At the start of the project, parents had little awareness of the importance of education for their children: “our children won’t eat letters when they grow up”.

Children and Development, in conjunction with the Education Department, set out to **make school a more welcoming place**, by improving boarding facilities. In accordance with the concept of “child-friendly schools”, work was carried out, with help from the children, to fit out kitchens, dining halls, dormitories, libraries, sick bays, etc. Equipment followed. Work was also done to improve hygiene (access to drinking water) and nutrition (kitchen gardens, breeding poultry, etc.) for the young boarders. Lastly, cultural and sporting activities afforded an opportunity for exchanges between the various schools in the municipalities targeted by the project.

Breaking down geographical isolation. Over the years, the Ministry of Education has realised the importance of bringing primary schools closer to hamlets, opening “satellite” schools located half way between hamlets and the municipality. Children can now start primary school at the age of seven.

Pre-school education aimed at encouraging primary school attendance has been addressed as a matter of necessity. Many community nursery schools have been opened in hamlets in the districts of Bac Ha (see box). Village committees have the task of encouraging parents to send their children to school.

Parenting skills courses in Ontario: “Effective Parenting”

In Canada, a considerable number of bodies offer activities aimed at parents. We shall list a few examples of those catering for parents of young children, outlining their objectives, content, forms of intervention, target groups and format.

“Parents efficaces” is the French version of the American “Effective Parenting” course, based on the work of Thomas Gordon. It is a highly structured course, made up of 3-hour sessions once a week for 8 weeks. It primarily teaches communication techniques: negotiation, conflict resolution and listening skills. The course requires considerable commitment from parents, since it involves a great deal of writing, reading and personal reflection.

“Nobody’s Perfect”

This course sets out to produce beneficial changes in participants’ parenting skills. Its objectives are: to improve parents’ knowledge and understanding of their children’s health, safety and behaviour; to bring about favourable changes in parents’ behaviour; to improve participants’ confidence and the image they have of themselves as parents and to boost their personal resources.

8.2.2. a non-prescriptive approach

Looking ahead: These courses are offered to parents who are functioning effectively and can be self-directed. They often offer advice with a view to the future and emphasise aspects such as child development, stress management and all-encompassing approaches.

Parenting skills programmes offered in Ontario:

“Ad Lib”

“Ad Lib” is a group of parents who meet regularly for the purpose of improving their parenting skills, while getting to know themselves better. The group's philosophy is that each person has all the necessary resources in himself or herself to be a good parent. The idea is therefore not to give parents ready-made instructions, but to help them develop their ability to find their own answers or solutions.

Apart from counselling techniques, the forms of intervention used include simulations, role-plays, brainstorming, visualisation, video tapes and songs.

“Better Communication Can Be Learned!” parenting workshops

These parenting skills workshops have a number of general objectives: developing parents' self-confidence; boosting their self-esteem; enabling them to gain parenting skills and to feel competent as parents; and encouraging children to become responsible beings. The workshops are free of charge for parents of children of all ages.

“Parent Companions”

Set up in 1994, the “Parent Companions” programme is designed specifically to help young lone parents (under the age of 25) with children under five. The programme's goals are to give young parents an opportunity to enhance their skills, to boost their confidence in their parenting role and to defuse the tense atmosphere that sometimes exists within families, thereby strengthening family bonds. These goals are achieved through the provision of advice and impartial help tailored to the participant's culture and needs.

“Children are the Winners when Fathers are Present”

the programme's philosophy is that each what matters is not teaching fathers how to exercise their role, but giving them the desire to invest time and effort in their relationships with their children. Sample topics: “My Father and Me”, “Masculinity”, “Male-Female Relations (the Couple)”, “Sexuality and Sex Education”, “The Father's Role in Relation to School”, “Communication Basics”, “The Father in Relation to Authority and Discipline”, “Non-Violent Relationships and Aggression”, “Who Are We Now as Men and as Fathers?”