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BRIDGING THE GAPS IN EDUCATION OF ROMA YOUTH: I LEARN, ERGO I KNOW

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This essay sets out to put focus on the practical role of young people in the sector of human rights and obligations. The purpose is to point out a real possibility of improvement in the education of Roma children. What we also want to consider is their status in the educational system. First of all, allow us to explain the very title of the essay.

Initially, we would like to address the fact that an extremely small number of Roma children attend primary school at all. Causes for this are innumerable and diverse: high rate of poverty in our country, inadequate approach towards these children regarding teachers, school staff, social services, etc. Furthermore, it is our strong belief that the Ministry of Education is lacking the support and endorsement for inclusive education or, on the other hand, there are no adequate solutions that would lead to inclusion of Roma children into the educational system.

Nevertheless, we should not neglect one more issue regarding the evidently bad position of Roma children at schools. This very issue is reflected in the insufficient work with the children at schools, which creates even higher level of discrimination as well as ramifications for the society itself. One of the implications is the fact that even those who enroll and finish regular eight-year tuition do not have knowledge equivalent to the one acquired by the other children in the same position. That is, they leave school as functionally illiterate members of society despite the formal school attendance. Concerning other subjects,

such as mathematics, which includes much more than mere adding and subtraction, or geography, there is no need to mention the obvious lack of knowledge.

Roma children gain basic education just for the sake of formality and legal obligations, without acquiring structural and contextual quality. The level of gained knowledge does not correspond with the formal education they officially get. What we want to do is question the reasons for the fundamentally flawed system whereby we refer again to poverty, lack of support by government, educators inadequately trained in the field of multiethnic environment, etc.

Nevertheless, our goal is not to highlight system mistakes and evident challenges, but rather to raise awareness and to present an idea that might lead to improvement in the issue of *de facto* uneducated Roma children in our society. In particular, we aim towards integration, which would mean an approximately equal level of knowledge at the end of primary school among all children. It is our conviction that merely taking into account legal regulations and physical presence at school are not the solution to this issue. This is the reason we focus on the adjustable factors. All the facts prove that the educational curriculum and syllabus are not fulfilled when it comes to Roma children, aside from just few exceptions. The implementation of this idea should alter the circumstances and bring to reality children's *de jure* right to knowledge and education. Education must provide knowledge, but knowledge for all, as proclaimed and regulated by law, and according to each of us, who advocate egalitarian and democratic society.

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The second part of the essay addresses the ways of dealing with the high rate of uneducated Roma children and proposing a possible solution. Specifically, we suggest that students and, if possible, all young people, should be involved into the process of education, helping Roma children get appropriate knowledge. By implementing this solution not only do we make this world a better place for Roma children, but also for all students who might be engaged in the process, as well as the whole society. This would undoubtedly mean that the idea and its realization are not an end in itself.

A potential solution could be found in this completely novel kind of volunteer work. It would be a tremendous help for marginalized children, if we engage students of the final years at the faculties relevant for the fields children are studying – from mother tongue, foreign languages to sciences and humanities. Volunteer students would work in small groups

or, if necessary, individually with a certain pupil, and in such a way contribute to all the aspirations of our educational system, including Roma inclusion as well, which is conducted slowly and hard, although, there are certain bright examples. We are not here to focus on the poverty nor to the fact that almost all Roma families number many children. What we can do is to focus on the educational area we can make an improvement. We can all agree on the fact that there is room for alteration.

We also have to bear in mind that educators during their studies very often do not get at all the practical knowledge needed for the inclusion of any kind to be conducted. There is no systematic solution as such. On the institutional level, activities are very often based on the individual responsibility, which is not the best solution, at least not in this case. Hence, we find that implementing volunteer work with Roma children at schools would be beneficial for the society in several fields:

1) *Roma children* would gain an opportunity to acquire needed knowledge for their future, while attending additional tuition prepared in advance. Apart from elementary knowledge, pupils and volunteers might deal with all the school subjects which are perceived as difficult by children.

2) Apart from obvious humane stimulus, *volunteer students* would gain field experience. They will most definitely find the work useful, regardless of their future occupation. Volunteers would learn how the school functions practically, how the administration works, and what it is like to work among colleagues and, above all, with children.

3) We find that the practical tuition at *faculties* could be more applied. This could be achieved by recruiting students to implement the idea that we suggest in this paper.

4) *School staff* could add mentorship programs on behalf of this project, which will contribute to mutual benefit. Teachers can get information directly from faculties and learn about new tendencies in education, which are firstly imposed at the faculties. Students, on the other hand, would have an opportunity for correlation, which could serve as inspiration for tuition improvement. For these reasons, the idea is to share knowledge unselfishly.

5) Should we implement this project, it could be a milestone for the *reform* of our *educational system*. It might even become a law regulation.

6) In the long run, the *society* will benefit from having more educated members (primarily Roma children). Additionally, students will gain insight into the state of our society and educational system, which would result in staff being more aware, humane, tolerant and emancipated.

We find it necessary to emphasize that implementation of this project does not imply criticizing the previous work of the teaching staff in any way. Above all, it signifies providing help during work and involves cooperation among school employees, whose suggestions, support and guidance would be a crucial prerequisite for its practical introduction.

When it comes to technical reification, we believe it is not feasible to conduct this kind of project at all the schools in the Republic of Serbia at once. Therefore, social services and NGOs should be consulted and asked for evaluation in order to activate all necessary requirements for this idea to be realized. The permission of the Ministry of Education and the consent of a particular school, its staff and parents would be indispensable for a beginning of volunteer work after regular tuition once a week at a chosen school. It should be done during work days, or at weekends, if the school does not have accessible classrooms during school days. A group of students would be engaged to conduct tuition, bearing in mind interactive contents and creatively adjusted teaching materials.

Depending on the needs of children, volunteer tuition is to be done in groups or individually, with the aim to make all the appropriate learning materials accessible to Roma children. Both group and individual work with volunteers are desirable because volunteer students would have a different approach to children, a slightly less authoritative, which would boost children's motivation for learning. Age difference between volunteers and children is big enough so that there is a certain authority, but there is also space for openness and straightforwardness, which is often hard to achieve in regular tuition.

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Before the very end, we will present an example for this idea. Let us assume there is a Roma child in the fifth grade of primary school that has many problems in his family and/or in the society, but also a problem of being interested in reading and comprehending a book by Mark Twain – *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The idea is that a certain student volunteer, in this case from the Faculty of Literature, starts working with the child at school after tuition. His task would be to use dialogue, presentations, short movies, questions, in order to involve the child into the book, which would be followed by reading the book, either together with the student or just the child independently. If there are more children having a problem with this particular book, a volunteer student would then work in a group, using the same or similar techniques to make this book approachable. Meanwhile, during all these sessions, school staff would be involved – from the principal, psychologist, as well as teachers, who would guide and advise volunteers. We remind once more that the aim is not to build a school within the school, but rather to help teachers and involve students in the practical work.

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In summary let us consider all the benefits of this project. Apart from the evident and already presented mutual advantages for children and volunteers, this project raises awareness of the conditions marginalized Roma children live in. Comprehending these can initiate a conscious change of our society, which undoubtedly has to improve. This change in society can be initiated only by proactive attitude towards all the challenges present in our community. However, it is of paramount importance to emphasize that the activism itself grows as much as we raise awareness of the current challenges. What we would like to deracinate is the attitude that we need no changes. Quite the contrary - changes are essential in order to integrate our community into the European one and, wider, into the world, which would contribute to a better position of each individual. That would lead to more progressive, more humane and more emancipated community. The young generations are to execute this task, which is to be done directly, focusing on the core of a challenge. What we should keep in mind is the fact that many young people have no insight into life of Roma children, which is why many generalizations, stereotypes and discrimination of Roma children and Roma in general become a regularity. If we engage volunteer students to educate as many Roma children as possible, this would increase chances for Roma children's education. By doing this, volunteer students would raise awareness of how volunteer work is important and how

much empathy and altruism are relevant. Moreover, children would acquire real knowledge, useful for their future schooling and/or work. Furthermore, the support for the less affluent and marginalized segments of our society would ensure advantages for all. To sum up, this leads us to triple benefit: firstly, children gain knowledge through education, secondly, students became more emancipated and actively contribute to the society and finally, there is a global social improvement which comes as synthesis of two previously mentioned ideas.