

Discrimination or not? Romani children in Polish special schools and diagnoses of intellectual disability

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This comparative article examines the cognitive and linguistic functioning of Roma children attending both mainstream and special primary schools in Poland. Although many studies have investigated the segregation of Romani children in education, only a few of these have used psychological diagnostic tests as a source of information about Roma children. Our research addresses this gap and is an attempt to provide answers about the current situation of Romani children in both special and mainstream schools in Poland. A mixed-method research design was employed and two studies were conducted. In the first study, 77 Roma children were tested using Raven's Progressive Matrices (RPM) and two language competence tests: a Pictorial Vocabulary Test – Understanding (receptive vocabulary) and a Pictorial Vocabulary Test (expressive vocabulary). In the second study, we interviewed 54 Roma parents and school personnel. The results of Study 1 show that among Roma children previously diagnosed with a mental disability, RPM results revealed that 19 percent were in fact of average intellectual ability, 52 percent were below average (9 percent borderline), and only 29 percent had a mild disability. The possible reasons for this were analysed in Study 2. Based on semi-structured interviews, the social context of Roma children's education is presented. Finally, we discuss the situation of Roma children in the Polish education system and make recommendations for modifications to current practice.

Keywords: Roma minority; discrimination; school segregation; bilingualism; culturally relevant diagnosis; mixed-methods research design

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Introduction

The Roma are Europe's largest minority, with a population estimated between 10–12 million dispersed across the continent, mostly in the countries of Central and Eastern (CEE) and South-Eastern (SEE) Europe (European Commission 2017). The Roma are also one of Europe's most vulnerable minority groups; they experience discrimination in most aspects of life, such as healthcare (they have higher rates of infant mortality and lower life expectancy), housing, and the labour market (unemployment rates among them are more than five times higher than in the general population of their countries of residence), and they are often disproportionately affected by poverty (O'Nions 2010; Pietraszkiewicz 2011). As far as educational deprivation is concerned, the Roma are "the most vulnerable group experiencing racism and discrimination in education" (EMCRX 2005: 23).

There have been several international projects aimed at helping improve the situation, such as INSETROM and Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015. These projects were designed to fight discrimination of Roma in different areas of life, including education, healthcare, and housing. Although generally successful, the projects encountered a variety of obstacles, such as difficulty in achieving broader inclusion of Roma communities in their respective countries.

However, another perspective on educational support of Roma children was provided by Matras et al. (2015). They exposed the somewhat questionable agendas of some NGOs working for the Roma (but not *with* the Roma) population in Manchester, which demonstrated a false picture of the Roma population's needs and situation in order to create an explicit reason for becoming outside grant recipients. The NGOs in question performed a job that was actually undermining the Roma population and passing on false information to teachers.

Important controversies around the education of Roma children in Ghent have been described by Hemelsoet (2013) and could be summarized as homogenizing and minimizing the complexity of their frequent migration, and focusing instead on descriptions of their life in terms of multiple deficiencies. The group has been described as lacking housing, documentation, and employment. The rights of Roma children to education have been understood as the right to mainstream education, which might be less desirable or even completely meaningless for Roma children because their lack of official identification documents often means there is little chance of them being employed. Also, they often leave school at the age of 18 without having obtained any educational certificate. Finally, education may be less desirable, especially because skills pertaining to very practical matters can be

obtained at home (e.g. learning how to build a shelter or communicate with welfare workers) (Hemseloet 2013).

Considering the life circumstances of Roma families, children's participation in school education might clash with other family priorities, including securing their livelihood. In Roma families, there are various strategies for the transmission of knowledge and skills. Parents expect their children to become skilful traders and, as a first step, hone these skills within their own community (Themelis and Foster 2013). Traditional Roma education also prioritizes the importance of family life, oral transfer of important information, experiential learning of skills, and socializing children to important values such as respect for elders, self-initiative, group solidarity, keeping one's word, and willingness to defend one's family (O'Nions 2010).

Another important reason for the limited willingness of Roma children and their families to participate in school education pertains to the mainstream school curriculum, in which no information about their history and contribution to the cultures of different countries can be found. Also, prejudice against Roma in schools is not sufficiently addressed (Themelis and Foster 2013). Since the linguistic competence of children poses a serious barrier to their participation in mainstream education, it is highly recommended that their native tongue be used for school instruction during the early stages of their education. This would also help them retain their identity (O'Nions 2010) and consequently diminish parents' concerns about school's negative influence on their children's ethnic identity.

The positive impact of language support provided by, for example, employing bilingual teachers and teachers of English as an Additional Language (EAL) and forming good relations with parents seems to be very important in overcoming barriers in school attendance in multinational groups of pupils from Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Poland attending school (Clark 2014).

The educational achievements of Romani children are very low across Europe, which is even more troubling as in some regions of Europe the percentage of the Roma population below the age of 19 is twice the national average (O'Nions 2010; OSI 2007; UNESCO 2007). Despite considerable improvement in their education during the socialist period in Central and Eastern Europe, manifestations of discrimination against these children are still apparent in every aspect of their schooling (UNICEF 2011). Forms of discrimination differ from country to country, but all affect the levels of enrolment and retention of pupils, and contribute to their poor educational achievements. According to international reports, the Roma have the lowest secondary school attendance rates in Europe (no more than

20–25 percent) and a high dropout rate as early as primary school (Eurochild 2010; European Commission 2011a). The situation is particularly difficult in Romania, where 38 percent of Roma children never finish primary school (Járy 2012). Researchers also highlight some additional factors affecting the low level of education of Roma children, such as the lack of preschool education, children's language difficulties, low levels of academic motivation, and teachers' lack of special educational qualifications and motivation to support Roma children in their education (Járy 2012; O'Nions 2010; UNESCO 2010). Preschool education plays a vital role in ensuring that children make a smooth entrance into the education system. Themelis and Foster (2013) postulate that educational play sets should be available for Roma parents to borrow at schools, in order that they might help their children, who do not attend preschool, to learn some basic school-related skills in the safe home environment. Also, O'Nions points to the fact (2015; as mentioned in Henrard 2010: 76) that for disadvantaged minority groups, support in the context of education could include preschool support, free school transport, and language proficiency classes. This is confirmed by UNICEF (2011), which attributes the main causes of poor educational outcome to a lack of high-quality early-childhood education services, a lack of birth registration certificates, the low socio-economic status of Roma families, and their social exclusion and educational segregation, which remains a serious problem across Europe. Segregation is a particularly crucial barrier preventing access to quality education for Roma children (European Commission 2011b). According to UNICEF (2011), it takes three major forms: segregation between schools, segregation within schools, and segregation into special schools.

The first type of segregation – between schools – is common in Bulgaria, where the parents of non-Roma students withdraw their children from schools attended by Romani pupils. This results in the emergence of ethnically Roma schools (attended by 70 percent of all Roma students), their ghettoization, and usually in lower standards of facilities and curricula, as teachers working there are not prepared to teach pupils of different cultural backgrounds to themselves (UNICEF 2011). Many authors from Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia (see, for example, Andreescu 2004; Friedman et al. 2009; Jigau and Surdu 2002; Magyari-Vincze and Harabula 2010, 2011) have also found that Roma children are concentrated in the poorest schools, where there is a complete lack of basic resources, and where the quality of education is very poor.

The second type of segregation – within schools – occurs in more heterogeneous schools, where Romani pupils are often separated from the majority either by being assigned to a specific area of the class for Roma students, by

the creation of “Roma classes,” or by their being placed into special classes.¹ Such practices were and/or are still popular in the majority of Central and Eastern European countries such Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland (Grzymała-Moszczyńska et al. 2011; OSI 2007; Salner 2005; Schvey et al. 2005; UNICEF 2011). According to a recent report by FRA (2014), in Slovakia 58 percent and in Hungary 45 percent of Roma children attend classes with all or many Roma pupils. In Bulgaria and Spain around 60 percent of Roma children attend ethnically mixed classes, while in the Czech Republic, France, Italy, Portugal, and Poland more than 50 percent of Roma children attend classes with some or non-Roma classmates. In Greece, about 30 percent of Roma children attend schools or classes where all or the majority of their peers are Roma (FRA 2014). In Poland, creating “Roma classes” has been popular for many years but, after extensive media coverage concerning ethnic segregation in Polish schools, the Minister for Education declared that action must be taken to abolish such practices (Kwiatkowski et al. 2011). At the present time, “Roma classes” do not exist in Polish schools, and schools which attempt to start such segregation face strong opposition from local authorities and NGOs. However, according to the FRA, still less than 10 percent of Roma children attend segregated classes. The relatively small number of Roma children in such classes does not seem to be a result of any specific administrative/educational approach. It is rather a result of the migratory (both inside and outside the country) decisions of many Roma families. Their children fall through the net of administrative registers and as a result are not placed in any type of school establishment.

The last, and from the authors’ point of view the most controversial, kind of segregation – into special schools – is widespread, and consists in the placement of Roma children in special schools dedicated to intellectually disabled children. Data from many independently conducted studies confirms that Romani students are overrepresented in special schools or classes for children with intellectual disabilities in many CEE countries (Nowicka-Rusek 2011; OSI 2007; UNICEF 2011). These findings suggest that special education serves as a collateral system of education for Roma children. Estimates cited in country reports put the proportion of Roma students in special schools at 80–90 percent in Bulgaria, 80 percent in Slovakia, 80 percent in Montenegro,

1. It is worth highlighting that “Roma classes” were designed entirely for Roma pupils. In Poland they appeared in the 1990s as a result of pastoral care of local parish priests in the impoverished village of Łososina Dolna in the south of Poland (Nowicka 1999). Such classes may or may not be located in state school premises. On the other hand, “special classes” consist of children who require additional teaching assistance because of various disabilities (e.g. mental impairment). They can be located in public schools and embrace both Roma and non-Roma children.

60–70 percent in Macedonia, 50–80 percent in Serbia, and 16.8 percent in Poland (OSI 2010; Roth and Moisa 2011; Polish Roma Union 2012). However, according to an FRA (2014) survey, these numbers look quite different as the percentage of children up to the age of 15 reported as having attended a special school or class organized “mainly for Roma” was 23 percent in the Czech Republic, 20 percent in Slovakia, 15 percent in Greece, 14 percent in Bulgaria, but only 1 percent in Poland.

Due to the low preschool attendance and low quality of education among the Roma, children starting primary school do not usually speak the official language of their country of residence fluently. This results in their inability to study at the same pace as their peers from the majority group and, as a consequence, a deepening of educational inequalities. Many, if not most, teachers are also not prepared to work with children from a different culture, resulting in inadequate levels of educational support. These factors, in turn, often result in the negative assessment of Roma children’s abilities and serve as arguments for the use of special pedagogical tools and methods within a special school or class. Such arguments are often confirmed by invalid psychological assessments, based on linguistically and culturally biased tests, which can and do serve to distort evaluation scores (Cahn et al. 1998; UNICEF 2011). In most cases, children placed in special schools do not receive an education of a standard equal to that in regular schools, and rarely have the opportunity to go back into a mainstream school, something which UNICEF (2011) describes as an “educational dead-end” (ERRC 2004; OSI 2007).

Although many studies have investigated the segregation of Romani children in education, we have found only one which used psychological diagnostic tests as a source of information about Roma children (Járy 2012); however, none have been conducted in Poland. Járy tested 77 Roma and 55 Hungarian children aged from 6 to 11 using Raven’s Coloured Progressive Matrices (RCPM). Based on the results, she found that 63 percent of Roma children fall into the category of having a mental disability, 30 percent have below average intelligence, and only 7 percent have average intellectual ability. There is also research pertaining to secondary assessment of Roma children of Czech descent in British schools (O’Nions 2015). Educational psychologists in the UK assessed these children and found that 85 percent of them had previously attended special schools, while only 2–4 percent of the group really needed learning assistance (Fremlova and Ureche 2011).

Our research addresses this gap and is an attempt to provide answers about the current situation of Romani children in both special and mainstream schools in Poland. Roma children usually begin their education in mainstream schools. They are directed to psychological assessment once they start to

experience learning or behavioural difficulties. If a child is diagnosed with intellectual disability, parents can decide if they want to place their child in special school or to leave him/her in a mainstream school. In order to check whether they have any intellectual disability (Study 1), we used non-verbal intelligence tests and linguistic tests measuring language skills. The second part of our research (Study 2) concerned systemic aspects of Romani children's education in Poland. We conducted interviews with different social actors: Romani parents, school head teachers, teachers, teaching support staff, and psychologists.

Firstly, we describe the methodology employed in Study 1, with a special focus on the description of the psychological tests used in the assessment of Roma children's cognitive and language ability. Next, the quantitative results and their interpretation are presented. This is followed by a description of Study 2, devoted to the qualitative analysis of Roma children's education in the social context. The final part of the article considers the current situation for Roma children in the Polish education system and presents recommendations aimed at changing the current state of affairs.

Three detailed hypotheses have been verified:

- Hypothesis 1 (H1). The IQ of Roma children in Polish special schools, measured with RPM, remains within the range of results which indicate an intellectual disability (below the fifth percentile);
- Hypothesis 2 (H2). The IQ of Roma children in Polish special schools, measured with RPM, differs significantly from that of Roma children in Polish mainstream schools;
- Hypothesis 3 (H3). The level of knowledge of the Polish language among Roma children in special schools is significantly lower than that of Roma children in mainstream schools.

Study 1

Methodology

Seventy-seven children (44 percent girls) aged 6–16 years (average age 10.25, SD 2.25), attending both mainstream and special schools in Poland, participated in this research.² There were 20 (26 percent) participants attending

2. Children with difficulties such as learning disabilities or behavioural problems may be referred to a psychological clinic by parents or teachers (from pre-school or school). Parents always have to give agreement for a child to be tested by a psychologist. If a child has a diagnosis of intellectual disability, the child's parents decide whether to send the child to a special or mainstream school for an integration class. If a child does not go to nursery school (which is common in the case of Roma children), referral to a psychological clinic occurs only when the child starts school.

special schools and 57 (74 percent) from mainstream schools, of whom 11 children had a previous psychological diagnosis of intellectual disability. Altogether we examined 31 children with a previous diagnosis of intellectual disability and 46 children with no such diagnosis.³

Measurement of the children's intellectual functions was performed using a Polish adaptation of Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices (RSPM) (Jaworowska and Szustrowa 2000) and of RCPM (Jaworowska and Szustrowa 2003). These non-verbal tests are typically used in the intelligence testing of children and youth; they are designed to measure components of general intelligence and, in particular, processes which are part of the creation of concepts (comparison, abstraction, deduction, generalization). RPM tests the ability to detect relations between abstract elements (eductive ability). Performance in RPM testing is not dependent on the linguistic skills of the child, who must, nevertheless, understand the instruction.⁴

Apart from this cognitive functioning measurement, which is not related to the use of language, tools measuring the linguistic competence of Roma children were also used. The aim was to assess their knowledge of the Polish language, but in a way which would not interfere with the IQ test results. In order to measure the children's ability to understand speech (receptive vocabulary) we used *The Picture Vocabulary Test – Reception* by Haman et al. (2010, experimental version; later published by Haman and Fronczyk in 2012). In each of the two versions (A and B) of the test there are 88 cards.

3. Please note that we made every endeavour to obtain a representative sample of the population of Roma children in special and mainstream schools in Poland. According to the "Information for students of Roma origin directed to special education" listed on the Ministry of Interior and Administration website, most of the Roma children attending schools live in the Małopolskie, Opolskie, and Śląskie voivodships. Therefore, from a list of all schools attended by Roma children in these voivodeships that was provided by the Association of Roma in Poland, we randomly chose six schools (three special schools and three mainstream schools). Children attended classes made up of 16 to 25 children. At the school where most Roma children were educated, they accounted for 14 percent of all students. For this reason, we argue that by choosing Roma children from the target population at random we maximized the extent to which our research sample is representative. However, we are aware that the Roma communities' situation varies in different voivodships and the outcome of this research should not be easily generalized on the whole Roma population in Poland. Thus, the general recommendation indicates a necessity for further research on the Roma children's situation in mainstream and special schools in those voivodships not covered by our study. Finally, it is worth emphasizing that Roma children in each school were identified based on the information provided by the Roma assistants and/or pedagogical staff.

4. RPM is used to measure general intelligence (factor g), in other words, the ability to reason about relationships (referred to by Raven as eductive ability). We decided to use this test because the procedure does not depend on the linguistic skills of the child and because this test has also successfully been used in another study (Jary 2012). While we agree that this is not a fully culturally neutral test because of the material it contains, we argue that RPM is more independent of language and knowledge than Wechsler's Scale.

Each test card (A4, horizontal) contains four images (one referring to the keyword, three to distractions), measuring 10 x 10 cm, distributed evenly every 1 cm. Each picture has a black frame to distinguish it easily from the others. The pictures are numbered from left to right, and each card has its own number in the bottom right-hand corner. The examiner presents each card, with its four images, to a child and asks which picture represents the keyword. To each keyword are assigned three other pictures, designed to distract the child: phonetic, semantic, and thematic (Haman et al. 2010). If the child points to one of them, their answer is wrong. For example, if the keyword is “loaf,” the phonetic distraction is “drum” [in Polish they sound similar: “*bochenek-bębenek*”], the semantic distraction is “slice” and the thematic, “knife” (Haman et al. 2010). In order to measure the child’s ability to use the Polish language (expressive vocabulary) we used the *Vocabulary Test* by Haman and Smoczyńska (2010, experimental version) consisting of 50 images. After being shown each picture, the child is asked (in the case of nouns) “What is it?” or “Who is it?” and (in the case of verbs) “What is he or she doing?” The responses are then noted on the answer sheet.

Application of the tests

A total of 18 schools were randomly chosen from the list (sampling frame) of 38 schools provided by the Association of Roma in Poland which were attended by Roma children in the provinces of Małopolska, Śląsk, and Opolskie. The list was comprehensive and contained all schools in these provinces attended by children from all four Roma minority groups living in Poland. The research began with a telephone call to each head teacher, to whom we presented a general outline of our study. After gaining acceptance, letters were sent giving detailed information on the topic of the research, the methods to be employed, and the composition of the research team. In most cases head teachers agreed to allow the children to participate in the study, sometimes even helping the researchers to obtain written consent from the parents. All parents were fully informed about the procedure and the aim of the research and the full anonymity of the single test result. Parents were asked to sign an informed consent form allowing their children to participate in the project. If parents were not able to read the consent on their own, the text was read to them by a Roma assistant. Among the parents approached, 13 refused to allow their children to participate. In each case, the child also had to agree; we asked each child if they were willing to take part in the study and we informed them that if they found the procedure unpleasant they could quit at any time without any consequences. Two children refused to participate in the study.

The fieldwork took place from January to March 2011 and was conducted by a team of four psychologists trained in the use and interpretation of

RPM results. The individual examination of children in both special and mainstream schools took place in a separate room (the psychologist's or pedagogical counsellor's office, or an empty classroom). The conditions were good, and the silence and lack of distractions made it possible for children to concentrate on the task.

The tests using RPMs were conducted after the contract between the researcher and the child had been agreed. Choosing the proper version of the RPM in the case of children with no intellectual disabilities depended on the child's age. Younger children (those aged under nine years and 11 months) completed RCPM, while the older ones completed RSPM. Children directed to special education due to intellectual disability completed the RCPM version regardless of their age. In order to make sure that the children understood the instructions, fluent Romani-speaking Roma educational assistants were present during this part of the examination. The instructions were given in Polish and in the child's native tongue when necessary (i.e. the Roma assistant was present in the room to translate). The assistant was asked to leave the room and was not present for the other parts of the test.

Results

In this part we present the children's results in all the tests: RPM, *The Picture Vocabulary Test: Reception* by Haman et al. (2010) and the *Vocabulary Test* by Haman and Smoczyńska (2010). The raw data gained from the research were statistically analysed and processed through Statistica 9.0 and PASW Statistics 17.0. Please note that we analysed the standardized scores of RPM to compare different age groups (there are no gender groups in the standardized test scores). We compared the level of intelligence only for children attending different schools; this was the main aim of our research.

Table 1 and Figure 1 list the various categories of intellectual ability and disability based on the outcome of prior psychological diagnoses of intellectual disability compared to the results of tests using RPM.

Based on a previous psychological diagnosis of intellectual disability, we distinguished 46 children with no intellectual disabilities and 31 with at least mild mental disability. The age-adjusted and standardized RPM scores were used to distinguish the disability groups. According to the classification presented in the manual (Jaworowska and Szustrowa 2000, 2003), a score below the fifth percentile indicates "mental retardation."⁵ In our analysis

5. In the remainder of this article, the term "retardation" refers directly to the V category of the results' interpretation in RPM (standard and coloured versions, see Jaworowska and Szustrowa [2000, 2003]).

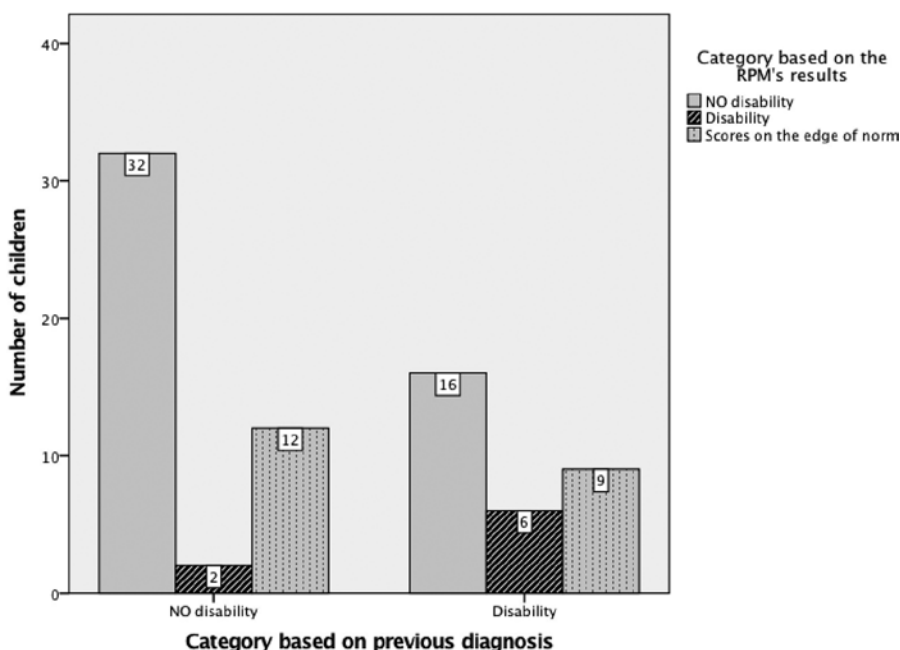


FIGURE 1. Mental functioning categories based on the previous psychological diagnosis of intellectual disability and on results of RPM

of the lower-than-average category, an 85 percent confidence interval was applied.⁶

Of 46 children classified as having no intellectual disability (and attending mainstream schools), two of them (4.3 percent) achieved results suggesting that they did in fact have an intellectual disability, 32 (c.70 percent) met the intellectual norm, and 12 (c.26 percent) attained score levels between “intellectual disability” and “significantly below average.” Among 31 children

6. It is important to note that according to classical test theory (see Anastasi and Urbina 1999) the final test score consists of the genuine score and the measurement error. For this reason, the score obtained cannot be treated as a final numeric result. To achieve this, one builds the so-called confidence intervals for the score obtained in order to obtain the genuine score. In the following research, we have assumed that scores below the fifth percentile indicate “intellectual retardation” (Jaworowska and Szustrowa 2003, 2007). Considering the aim of the examination (distinguishing children with intellectual disability), the interval estimation of the genuine score is therefore highly significant when scores are borderline, i.e. on the edge of scores indicating disability (those significantly below average and very low scores which indicate “retardation”). Moreover, even ignoring the confidence intervals, it is hard to agree that a child with a very low score is, in fact, intellectually disabled. Thus, the 85 percent confidence interval was applied. In this context, the results suggesting “retardation,” together with the whole confidence interval, remain within the range of very low scores.

TABLE 1. Mental functioning categories based on a prior psychological diagnosis of intellectual disability and on the results of tests using RPM

			Category based on the results of tests using RPMs including 85% confidence interval			Total
			No disability	Disability	Scores at the edge of norm	
Category based on the previous psychological diagnosis of intellectual disability	No disability	Number of children	32	2	12	46
		% of category based on prior diagnosis	69.6	4.3	26.1	100
	Disability	Number of children	16	6	9	31
		% of category based on prior diagnosis	51.6	19.4	29.0	100
	Total	Number of children	48	8	21	77
		% of category based on prior diagnosis	62.3	10.4	27.3	100

previously diagnosed as intellectually disabled, 16 (c.52 percent) fell within the intellectual norm range, 6 (c.19 percent) scored below this level, and the results of nine children (c.29 percent) were in the score range between “intellectual disability” and “significantly below average.” The phi coefficient of the intellectual functioning based on the initial psychological diagnosis and the results obtained in the RPM equals $\phi = 0.30$; $p < 0.008$.

In the second part of the individual test we examined children’s Polish language skills using the *Vocabulary Test* by Haman and Smoczyńska (2010) to measure expressive vocabulary, and *The Picture Vocabulary Test – Reception* by Haman et al. (2010) to measure receptive vocabulary. The advantage of these tests is their form (pictures) and the possibility they offer to test both expressive and receptive vocabulary. In the Verbal Scale of Wechsler’s Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-R), all the sub-tests are provided verbally and/or read by a psychologist (based on verbal communication). In Vocabulary (one of the sub-tests of the Verbal Scale) a child has to

give an accurate definition of a word spoken by a psychologist without any support from the pictorial material. Haman's test, by focusing on a child's expressive and receptive vocabulary, enables researchers to gain a broader picture of Roma children's linguistic levels. In contrast to the tasks from the Verbal Scale, children can demonstrate their receptive language skills by pointing at the pictures in reply to the examiner's question. Three children's results were excluded from the analysis: two presented either an extremely high or an extremely low result and the third had a post-traumatic brain injury.

There were no significant statistical differences in the level of understanding and production of speech by primary school children attending either mainstream or special schools. In both tests the results were above average as more than half of the answers children gave were correct. In the case of the receptive vocabulary, the mean (71 for all children) is high (the maximum possible score is 88) and the majority of children achieved scores above the mean (45 children had scores of up to 70 and 65 children up to 60). In the case of the expressive vocabulary, the results were more varied, and the standard deviation was about 10 (half of the children achieved scores below the mean, see Table 2). It is important to underline that both research tools are intended for preschool children and that not all of the Roma children did well; this is visible in the high level of diversity of the results in both tasks (expressive and receptive vocabulary).

TABLE 2. Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) of vocabulary test results in groups of children from both mainstream and special schools

	Linguistic functioning			
	Expressive vocabulary		Receptive vocabulary	
	M	SD	M	SD
Mainstream schools	29.04	10.03	71.58	11.80
Special schools	28.75	10.10	69.35	13.70

We also observed differences in the results of the vocabulary tasks depending on the children's gender. Boys scored higher than girls in tasks measuring expressive and receptive vocabulary. No age differences were observed, regardless of the children's intellectual functioning. However, some significant age differences occurred between the intellectually disabled group and the group of children with no intellectual disabilities. There were also differences between these two groups in terms of their expressive and receptive vocabulary. The level of performance in the tasks measuring the

expressive and receptive vocabulary correlated very positively with children's results in the RPM. The higher the IQ measured with this test, the better the results in the linguistic tasks. The level of production and understanding of Polish language also correlated with the children's ages.

To summarize, no statistically significant differences were observed between the levels of performance of children from special and mainstream schools; this may be attributable to the varied level of intellectual functioning and the huge diversity of the children's ages. Children with an intellectual disability were much older than those with no intellectual disability, who were more socially and educationally experienced, which affects their expressive and receptive vocabulary. Children with no intellectual difficulties were younger, but their intellectual functioning level positively correlates with their vocabulary resources.

Generally, the Roma children were characterized by a good level of communication skill. They were eager to initiate interaction during the tests; they asked, "What are we going to do?", and were curious about the research aims and from where the examiners came. During the tasks measuring their expressive vocabulary, they often confused the meanings but usually gave words which were thematically or semantically similar to the stimulus word. Another indication of the good communication skills of Roma children was a strategy of naming the function of an object or describing an object or person. In reference to the development of definitional ability, naming the function of or describing an object is one of the easiest ways of defining the meaning of a given word. Such strategies were less common among children with intellectual disabilities.

Discussion

Table 1 and Figure 1 show that only six out of 31 supposedly intellectually disabled children, considering the 85 percent confidence interval, acquired scores indicating that they actually had an intellectual disability (in contrast to the group of children with no intellectual disabilities, in which only two children acquired such a score). The other 16 intellectually disabled children scored significantly below the average. It is worth noting that six children (19 percent) achieved average results.

There is one group that is potentially difficult to interpret (9 children, 29 percent) because their results range from an indication of "retardation" to scores significantly below the average. It would be a mistake to arbitrarily decide on their disability. They therefore form a separate subgroup of children who are particularly at risk of developmental delay and who require intense effort to compensate for their intellectual deficits. However, even if we acknowledge that children with scores at the edge of the intellectual norm

have intellectual disability, it does not change the fact that, in the case of 16 children with a previous psychological diagnosis of intellectual disability, the RPM results suggest that they are not really “handicapped.” The question arises, therefore, as to whether it is justifiable to place these 16 out of 31 children in special schools? The answer is not clear. If we agree that only a child with a previous psychological diagnosis of intellectual disability can be placed in a special school, there is no doubt that these 16 children, with scores indicating an intellectual norm, should not be in special schools. Yet there may have been other difficulties of which we are unaware which explained the children’s placement in special schools. This is highly unlikely, however, in the case of the six children whose results indicate average intellectual functioning which cannot be explained away by the lack of access to the previous psychologists’ diagnoses.

Of the children with a prior diagnosis of disability (children from special schools), 19 percent scored average results. We may cautiously anticipate that they would benefit from being reclassified as children with no intellectual disability. The results indicate that they have good intellectual function and that there are no counter-indications to their attendance at mainstream schools. The group of children (68 percent of all the children tested) whose results indicate significantly lower-than-average intellectual function should be offered supplementary support in order to compensate for their deficits and intellectual difficulties. It should also be made clear that mainstream schooling can positively influence a child’s development.

The phi coefficient constituting the covariance category of intellectual functioning based on prior psychological diagnosis and the RPM results exceeded the level of statistical significance. In other words, we observed very little relation between the categories of intellectual functioning (educational disability vs no disability) and the categories defined by the RPM results. We expected there to be a small percentage of children with a previous psychological diagnosis of intellectual disability whose test results confirmed it. However, among the children from special schools were some whose intellectual function could be described as average (therefore, within the norm) and who could and probably should continue their education in mainstream school. Still, we cannot in any way draw conclusions about the nature of cause and effect in the case of this phenomenon. In ideal conditions, we might expect a significant and at least moderate correlation between the categories of a child’s intellectual function as defined by the RPM results and the child’s prior psychological diagnoses. The ideal conditions are understood to offer the possibility of carrying out both measurements within a short time interval. In our study, it is hard to say what changes have occurred since a child’s previous psychological diagnosis

based only on the tests we used. We are far from stating that there were mistakes in previous diagnoses; the most likely scenario is that a child's disability is not permanent, but is caused by their social background and lack of educational experience (Glaser and Silver 1994; Anastasi and Urbina 1999). Special and mainstream schools, which base their educational care on these earlier psychological diagnoses of intellectual disability, have a legitimate opportunity to individualize the education process, and thus to compensate for a child's previous cognitive deficits. A discrepancy between the categories may be interpreted as the positive result of pedagogical care undertaken following recommendations from an earlier psychological diagnosis which constituted the background for the legitimate diagnosis of "mental retardation."

- Therefore H₁, that the IQ of Roma children in Polish special schools, as measured with RPM, remains within the range of results indicating that intellectual disability (i.e. below the fifth percentile), has not been confirmed.

The results of children with no intellectual disabilities were significantly higher than those of children with a prior psychological diagnosis of intellectual disability; similar results are obtained when comparing children from special and mainstream schools. The results of children with no intellectual disabilities may be described as average, while those of intellectually disabled children remain in the low-score category. We cannot forget that when talking about means (average scores), we are not analysing individual cases. During an individual diagnosis, each result has to be analysed separately. Moreover, any extreme results, such as scores of children with severe mental "retardation," influence the average results of the whole group. On a statistical level, these data indicate that children diagnosed as intellectually disabled differ, in fact, in the way they function intellectually compared to children without intellectual disabilities. What is even more interesting is that children from both special and mainstream schools do not differ in terms of their test results. In other words, in both kinds of school, children's cognitive functioning is mixed (i.e. both groups are diverse, consisting of both intellectually disabled children and those with no intellectual difficulties); we would normally expect the two groups to be less internally diverse, but rather more different as a group from each other. Taking this into account:

- H₂, that the IQ of Roma children in Polish special schools measured with RPM differs significantly from that of Roma children in Polish mainstream schools, has not been confirmed.

Nor has

- H3, that the level of knowledge of Polish language among Roma children in special schools is significantly lower than that of Roma children in mainstream schools, been confirmed by our study.

Children from special schools do not differ from those attending mainstream schools in terms of their expression and creation of speech in the Polish language, yet this does not mean that the level of Polish language skills is the same for children with or without an intellectual disability. Our analysis revealed a correlation between the level of a child's expression, understanding and production of speech, intellectual ability, and age. This correlation proves that older children scored better in tasks measuring the expression and creation of speech. This has also happened in the case of children with a higher level of intellectual functioning. The difference in age between Roma children with and without disability is statistically significant: the disabled children are older. Children's age is correlated to broader social experience, a longer history of attending Polish school, and longer education in the Polish language. But in the case of intellectually disabled children, the characteristics above did not translate into better results in the linguistic tasks. The difficulties which the Roma children had with the Polish language may be due to intellectual disability or to the children's bilingualism. The families of many of the examined children use the Romani language for everyday communication. In most cases, school is the first place in which they hear and use Polish.

Study 2

Methodology

In our study, the following groups were all engaged in the process of educating Roma pupils in schools attended by Roma children: the parents of Roma children attending both special and mainstream schools and Roma educational assistants and personnel, including head teachers, teachers, psychologists, and teaching support staff such as special educational needs specialists or pedagogical counsellors. We interviewed the parents of 25 Roma pupils. The lower number of parents in comparison to the number of children is partially caused by the fact that most of the pupils came from multiple-child families (in which case more than one child was examined). In other cases, it was not possible to contact the parents (invalid telephone numbers). We also interviewed 54 members of staff from schools attended by Roma

children: six Roma educational assistants,⁷ nine head teachers, 31 teachers, and eight psychologists and special educational needs specialists.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school staff and Roma parents of children who participated in Study 1. Interviews with the teaching staff consisted of an assessment of the children's general, intellectual, and social functioning and of parental engagement in their child(ren)'s education and school life. Interviews conducted with parents concerned the following issues: assessment of the child's general, intellectual, and social functioning, especially after starting at a special school; assessment of the school's functioning from the point of view of an ethnic minority and, in the case of parents whose children attended special schools, the procedures for placing a child in one.

Results

Social context

Our interviews with parents and information gained from other people interviewed during the study indicate that the majority of the students we tested come from multiple-child families in poor living conditions, primarily caused by the parents' unemployment or low paying jobs. One of them described the situation with these words: "Who gives work to a gypsy? I'd take any job." One of the mothers said, "Father [referring to her husband] earns 1,100 zlotys a month [approximately £220] and I have to buy four loaves of bread every day." The families often live in social housing where the children have no space or adequate conditions in which to do their homework or keep their books, which is why some parents think it is better for a child to stay on later at school and do his or her homework with the help of the Roma educational assistant.

It is usually the mothers who take care of the children and, as they are often themselves illiterate, they had trouble helping their sons and daughters with homework, or making sure that the child gets to school on time. One of the Roma assistants told us the story of one mother who could not tell the time; for this reason, she got up – as she said – "when the sun rises," which caused regular delays in the children's arrival at school in the autumn–winter period.

7. Roma educational assistants are recruited from the Roma community and are considered by this community as trusted people who help to facilitate contact between Roma families and respective schools. As "cultural brokers" they often literally translate the language (they are bilingual, i.e. Romani and Polish speakers) and culture of one community to another. Roma assistants are employed at schools in accordance with the Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 19 August 2003, which is devoted to establishing a long-standing programme to support the Roma community in Poland.

Attitudes towards education

Concern for their children's education is quite uncommon among Roma groups. Parents find it hard to perceive school education as valuable because it seems like a luxury in their difficult financial situation. One of the mothers stated that "Education is not important when there's nothing to put on the table." According to one of the teaching staff, "Roma families are not interested in their children's education; this attitude will change only if they see that education is worth something – that who is educated has cash." The poor financial situation of these families results in frequent changes of residence in the search for a livelihood. Moreover, migration abroad of the whole family has a great negative influence on the education of their children, who go to school neither in the old nor in the new place of residence. The children's low level of attendance (below 50 percent) during the school year prevents them from progressing to the next educational level, even if their school grades are acceptable. Sometimes a fine is imposed on families whose children have a low record of attendance, although, as three of the head teachers claimed, this is a very rare practice that is usually used only when all else fails. The children's absence is sometimes caused by the need for them to take care of their younger siblings if their mother is a single working parent.

Perception of special schools

There is much controversy surrounding parents' perceptions of their children's attendance at special schools. Two extreme standpoints were identified during our research. For four of the interviewed parents, sending their children to a special school was seen as something dangerous, something to protect their children from. For nine interviewed parents, a special school represents a safe and friendly place where a child is not threatened by peer violence, and the educational requirements are adjusted to suit the pupils' abilities. Furthermore, the family receives extra income from child-support funds. One of the fathers claimed "I send all my children to the special school that I attended in the past. My daughter was placed in a special school after preschool."

At the same time, one of the school workers stated that "It would be good if special schools didn't fight so much for Roma kids. Doctors tend to diagnose epilepsy so that a psychological-pedagogical clinic can give a diagnosis of disability and place a child in a special school. This gives a child a welfare benefit, so the family has an extra income." Such a statement was also confirmed by seven other school workers. Special schools are often valued for their friendly atmosphere; therefore, many former special school students are willing to place their own children there. In some cases, students in

special schools have nearly 100 percent attendance records. The teachers also emphasized that many students achieve success in art and dance contests.

According to statements made by eight school workers (school psychologists and Roma assistants), some of the parents want their children to be placed in a special school so much that they instruct them not to cooperate with the examiner during the diagnosis in a psychological–pedagogical clinic. The same people also told us of children (mostly girls) who did very well in primary school until year fifth or year sixth (i.e. 9–11 years old), but who were then transferred to a special school the following year, probably due to the fear of bride kidnapping rituals which lead to forced marriage according to the Roma code (*Romanipen*).

While parents did not explicitly reveal their opinions on special schools and home schooling, they were manifested by parents' reactions to our invitation to the study. Parental fears are revealed in these quotes: "It will turn out that children are disabled and will be placed in a special school," "Our kids will be like guinea pigs," and "My child will be discriminated against because of the test results." It is worth mentioning that in some special schools the threat of being placed in mainstream school works as a kind of punishment for a child's misbehaviour.

Discrimination of Roma students

At the same time, the parents of Roma children in mainstream schools are occasionally asked by the teachers and head teachers to place their children in a special school. One of their arguments, quoted by a parent, is "[be]cause the child is constantly crying" (three days after the beginning of the school year in the first grade). These actions by teachers are perceived by many parents in a very negative way: "I'll be kicking up a row for sending Roma children to special schools," said one of the mothers. Some of the parents do not want to send their children to special school, even if he or she has been diagnosed with mild mental "retardation." One of the fathers, whose wife – the mother of a female student with mild mental "retardation" – graduated from special school, stated that a child's attendance in such a school "brings nothing good." The Roma parents also complained about the schools' lack of understanding when parents sent in written justification for their child's absence because the doctors would not issue a medical certificate, even for severe illness. One of the fathers said, "You know, we sometimes send our children to school when they are sick, because the teachers do not believe us when we say or give a written statement that they are not well. They [the teachers] just think that we are cheating. ... It is racial discrimination."

Financial support for Roma children

In our interviews, many remarks made by school staff were related to the financial support received by Roma pupils and their families. Most Roma children had access to free meals in school canteens and all of their families benefited from Ministry of National Education subsidies for books and additional Ministry of Administration and Digitization financing for excursions and other school activities. However, we noted that these subsidies were only used in culturally appropriate ways to a certain extent. One of the very inclusive decisions was to spend part of the subsidy to enable Roma parents to accompany their children on school excursions, especially as they had previously been reluctant to let their children go without them. An example of an inappropriate way to spend the subsidies is using the money for sport and swimming classes for Roma children; we observed this in three schools. Due to the cultural taboo that forbids exposure of a person's body, Roma children (especially girls) did not attend these classes. It is important to remember that a similar problem – wearing PE kit – occurs during physical education classes, especially for older girls who have already started menstruation and are thus obliged to preserve their modesty by covering their body. In some cases, it was pointed out that this additional financing of Roma children at the expense of poor Polish children led to envy and tension between Roma and Poles, which does not help the two communities to integrate.

Another way in which the state supports Roma children's education is by giving them free school uniforms. Both parents and school staff highlighted some inconsistencies here. The majority of the parents interviewed (19 people) complained about the strict rules, according to which they can spend a given subsidy only on one category of items, e.g. school supplies. One of the mothers said, "There's no more space in the desk to store things [pens, pencils, etc.] so I put them under the sofa bed, but how is the kid supposed to go to school in bare feet?" Moreover, it was pointed out that it was absolutely essential to allocate uniform money for the whole year. When very expensive schoolbags and equipment are bought at the beginning of the year, there is often not enough money left to buy other basic items like pencils or pens during the remainder of the year. The expensive schoolbags were the envy of Polish pupils, and sometimes caused aggression. In some schools (where the Roma parents fully trusted the teachers and head teacher) equipment was collectively purchased for all the Roma children, and then given to them during classes as necessary.

Crucial role of Roma assistants

According to our observations, for the children, their parents, and their teachers, the presence of a Roma educational or teaching assistant is very important in the school environment (in 2012 there were around 100 Roma assistants in Poland). Their tasks include helping Roma students to understand instructions in class, helping with homework, and facilitating interactions between school staff and Roma parents, as well as providing very basic services like walking children to and from school. Unlike the other members of school staff, Roma assistants are trusted by the parents. They often play the role of cultural mediator, helping to solve difficult situations resulting from cultural differences, for they are fully aware of both parties' standpoints. At the same time, our research revealed that Roma assistants do not work in all schools attended by Roma children (they were present only in eight out of 18 schools that we visited). According to the four head teachers, it was sometimes impossible to find suitable candidates for this position. According to five other members of staff, those Roma assistants who had been helping the parents "taking the Roma children out" of special schools and putting them in mainstream ones, or who conflicted with the school management were no longer being hired. It is important to remember what kind of conditions Roma assistants come up against. The current regulations regarding the employment of Roma assistants requires that they have at least completed compulsory education, and it is not always possible within a community to find such a person that is willing to work as an assistant. This often leads to the position of assistant remaining vacant, to the detriment of Roma pupils.

Another study (Depta 2011), conducted with both school personnel and NGOs working among Roma children, confirms the results we have presented thus far. Teachers and educators (members of the school staff whose primary role is not to teach any specific subject, but to support pupils in the case of difficulties and to diagnose possible reasons for such difficulties) complain about the lack of adequate training when being assigned to work with this group of pupils. Therefore, Roma teaching assistants employed in schools have proved vital for teachers' pedagogical success. They serve as cultural brokers between school staff, Roma children, and their families. Sadly, the stringent regulations requiring Roma teaching assistants to hold a certificate of primary education make these positions hard to fill in many schools. Therefore, teaching assistants who *are* employed are often heavily overworked since they need to work at more than one school in the area.

One also should keep in mind that children from different Roma groups often have differing attitudes towards education. While the Roma group that is most assimilated in Poland – the Bergitka Roma, who settled in the country at the beginning of the nineteenth century – generally support children's

education, other groups such as the Polska Roma, the Lovari, and the Kalderash are mostly oriented towards preserving their traditional lifestyle, occupations, and customs. The education of their children does not for them represent a goal worth pursuing. In some extreme cases, children willing and interested in going to school might even be ridiculed by their relatives. It is also quite common that parents are often ambivalent regarding the value they attach to their children's education; they acknowledge its importance, but give little support to the children even if they obviously have problems in school (Magyari-Vincze and Harabula 2010; Pantea 2007). This parenting behaviour was also observed in poor non-Roma families whose children are less successful in school (Ghinărașu et al. 2004).

Depta's (2011) findings also demonstrate why children just beginning their school education often lack even the most basic language and performance skills. Many have never attended nursery school – either because their parents fear that their offspring will be mistreated there, or that the parents' own role might be undermined by nursery school teachers – and never have their own pencils, notebooks, or colouring books with which to practice the most rudimentary of skills necessary for their functioning at school. Járý's (2012) results also suggest a significant connection between preschool education and a child being well prepared to start school. Unfortunately, Roma children's school success cannot even be guaranteed by nursery school attendance because of the impeding effects of their home environment. A low socio-economic background can leave its mark on a child's development and even influence the evolution of his or her mental abilities (Járý 2012). As Depta's (2011) research shows, Roma children's attention span is often very limited due to the lack of structured activities at home, which are often based on watching South-American sitcoms *en famille*. All these deficits seriously undermine a child's motivation to attend school and to benefit from the extra-curricular educational opportunities which it offers, and which may be useful in overcoming some of their developmental deficits. These facts, coupled with the high level of absenteeism caused by frequent family economic migration to the UK or Germany, create a situation in which children who are marginalized in mainstream school could find a safe refuge in a special school, which also offers an additional financial bonus for them and their family.

Conclusion

It is essential to clearly point out that the aim of our research is definitely *not* to undermine the effectiveness of the previous psychological diagnosis procedure, which constitutes the basis for placing children in specialist institutions (assignment criteria to the group of intellectually disabled

children). However, educational segregation of children based on intelligence tests has also been much criticized and we do support these critical voices, as in our opinion such a situation should not have a place in educational systems (Greenberg 2010; O’Nions 2010, 2015; Kende and Neményi 2006). Our results describe the cognitive functioning of Roma children at the time of the study. Therefore, any discrepancy between the output of the earlier psychological diagnosis (assigning the category of intellectual disability) and the current results from our project should not be interpreted in such a way as to disadvantage this earlier diagnostic procedure. Any discrepancies may result from natural developmental changes as well as from the positive influence of conditions in both special and mainstream schools on children’s development. There are many indications that the cognitive defects of children who had a diagnosis of intellectual disability in the past have been visibly reduced. At the same time, information was gathered on the erroneous ways in which psychologists sometimes tested Roma children. This relates to their use of Wechsler’s Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-R) with Roma and other children who did not speak Polish well, and to their tendency to average out the scores of Verbal and Non-verbal Scales when differences between them were very high. Krasowicz-Kupis and Wiejak (2006) noticed that differences between a verbal and a non-verbal quotient represent differences between verbal and non-verbal material reasoning. They also stress that, when the difference reaches a level of statistical significance ($p < 0.05$), the IQ level of the full scale should be interpreted cautiously, and that it is important to remember that its diagnostic function is therefore very limited.⁸ In addition, caution in the interpretation of the results is recommended, given that the normalization of the test took place within a culturally different group, i.e. with Polish students. During the study we also came across the psychological diagnosis of intellectual disability in Roma children based on the Stanford–Binet intelligence scales (in Poland this is also called the Terman–Merrill Intelligence Scale). As noted by Jaworowska (2009), the Terman–Merrill Intelligence Scale belongs to a group of tests commonly used by psychologists in Poland, even though they have never been legally published there or were used without a proper cultural and psychometric adaptation.

These standards for psychologists diagnosing Roma children indicate the necessity to enrich the body of intelligence tests with non-verbal and culturally sensitive tests. In this case, there are various methods that can provide a more accurate and reliable diagnosis which considers the specific

8. Minimal differences between verbal and non-verbal quotients obtaining statistical significance level are shown in Table 25 of the Wechsler’s Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-R) manual (Mataczak et al. 2008).

nature of Roma children as bilinguals. The results obtained will therefore be more independent of the level of language skills. Moreover, low scores in non-verbal/culturally sensitive tests will be an indicator of the need to afford more time and attention to the child. Proper diagnosis represents only the first step towards overcoming the situation of disadvantaged Roma children. This step is important because it creates a legitimate reason to avoid placing Roma children in special schools and provides indications for additional school activities in state schools, including teacher training and helping children overcome language and cultural barriers between Roma culture and mainstream Polish culture. However, subsequent steps should be geared towards administrative and financial provisions.

At the macro level, we must admit that, since 2001, the Polish administration has taken various steps to facilitate the integration of the Roma community (according to the national census of 2011, there are 16,830 Roma in Poland), especially in the field of education. Recognizing the educational difficulties experienced by Roma pupils (Kwadrans 2007), the Polish Ministry of National Education (MEN) has taken legislative action to provide psychological and pedagogical assistance to children from different cultures (ethnic minorities and migrant children). The Polish Ministry of Administration and Digitization (MAC) has set up programmes dedicated to the Roma community: a pilot government programme in the Małopolska province was run in 2001–2003 and was then followed by a programme for the Roma community throughout Poland in 2004–2013.⁹ Education is one of the most important elements of this programme. Almost 64 percent of the financed projects were in support of Roma education – mainly financing Roma school assistants and purchasing school equipment for the children. In our perception, the most important achievement of this is introducing Roma assistants into many of the schools attended by Roma children. Thanks to this initiative, mainstream schools are becoming integration centres where Polish and Roma communities can meet on common ground. Now, the programme will be continued in a modified way as a “Programme of Roma Social Integration in Poland in the years 2014–2020.”¹⁰ There are also scholarship programmes for Roma students, set up in 2012 by the Minister of Administration and Digitization.¹¹ Currently the Centre for

9. For the reference see: <http://mnieszosci.narodowe.mac.gov.pl/mne/romowie/program-narzecz-spole/pilotazowy-program-rza>. Last accessed 2017.

10. For the reference see: <http://mnieszosci.narodowe.mac.gov.pl/mne/romowie/projekt-programu-integ/6882Projekt-programu-integracji-spolecznosci-romskiej-w-Polsce-na-lata-2014-2020.html>. Last accessed 2017.

11. For the reference see: <http://mnieszosci.narodowe.mac.gov.pl/mne/romowie/programy-stypendialne>. Last accessed 2017.

the Development of Education (ORE) in Warsaw also carries out training workshops and conferences for teachers and psychologists working with multilingual and multicultural children. In addition, in 2013, the ORE, in collaboration with the MEN, issued a publication entitled *Selected problems of psychological diagnosis of children and adolescents in the context of multiculturalism and multilingualism*, which covers topics which are often omitted from the education of future psychologists in Poland (Barzykowski et al. 2013).

However, in our opinion this is not enough. The field that should be significantly improved is, first and foremost, preschool education, which is crucial for bridging the educational gap between Roma children and ethnically Polish children. On average, 72 percent of ethnically Polish children attend preschool,¹² while in the Roma community this percentage can only be estimated at 40 percent (Biuro Obsługi 2012: 16) due to the lack of definitive statistical data. It would be worth considering the implementation of preschool financing programmes that would encourage Roma parents to send their children to nursery school, as well as the creation of a preschool programme recognizing Roma children's special needs that arise from their bilingualism and biculturalism. Employing Roma assistants at this level of education also seems to be an idea worth pursuing. Unfortunately, we did not collect data concerning whether the children who were diagnosed as having intellectual disability did or did not attend primary school. However, we believe that preschool education would allow further language problems to be reduced, supplementing potential early-education deficits and earlier acquaintance with an educational system for both children and parents, as these seem important factors leading to the present situation of many Roma children.

In the early years of education (primary school), it might be advisable to provide additional Polish language classes for Roma children, conducted by teachers trained to teach Polish as a foreign language (specialists in glottodidactics).¹³ Classes targeted mainly at intensive Polish language learning would almost certainly improve the situation for Roma children, hopefully evening out the differences resulting from their poorer Polish language skills (often a reason for their educational failure). Many of the teachers and Roma assistants we interviewed emphasized that such classes do not exist yet but that

12. Ministry of Education, *Współczynnik skolaryzacji netto w latach 2005–2011*, available at: www.men.gov.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1822&Itemid=320. Last accessed 2017.

13. Please note that the term “glottodidactics” is mainly used in Polish and Greek educational context and refers to teaching and learning methodology of foreign languages and it may be considered as an interdisciplinary and yet an independent field (see for a review Róg 2014).

it would be very helpful if they did. However, we would like to emphasize that, in our opinion, classes and schools for Roma children only are not an option; the only solution worthy of consideration is the setting up of additional Polish language classes for Roma students. Note, too, that a great deal of research in the field of psycholinguistics indicates a very strong association between the development of vocabulary skills and reading, especially comprehension (Snow et al. 2005; Wagner et al. 2006). The right vocabulary skills are therefore a condition for learning success based mostly on reading skills. For that reason, early diagnosis of a lower level of vocabulary skills may be crucial in the decision to provide support and opportunities to Roma children, especially those who come across the Polish language only in educational settings, before their schooling begins, i.e. in preschool.

It is vitally important to create classes in mainstream schools that would allow full inclusion of those Roma children with a prior diagnosis of intellectual disability. Such classes, which should be organized within mainstream schools, should be characterized by a smaller number of pupils and the presence of a teacher assistant. Such classes, referred to in the Polish educational system as “integration classes,” comprise both children with various learning disabilities who require learning support and children with no learning problems, i.e. usually both Roma and Polish children. They promote an inclusive model of education. The smaller class size, the more focused attention of better qualified teachers, and the presence of additional pedagogical helpers all mean that integration classes in state school provide a friendlier space for mutual encounters between parents from Polish and Roma communities in a more personal, less prejudiced atmosphere. Teachers in such classes have far more options to individualize the learning process and are more willing to help when they are given advice on which areas to focus on while working with a child with special needs. On the one hand, a child’s educational needs are better met in such classes and, on the other, their peers – who represent the intellectual norm – create a friendly environment for social and intellectual development. For many of the children who participated in our research, their teachers pointed out that the origin of their intellectual disability often lies with the lack of parental attention due to difficult living conditions, and the few opportunities the children have to come into contact with a cognitively enriching environment.¹⁴ In a class of 30 students, one teacher has very little opportunity to individualize the learning approach in order to meet the needs of a particular child. However, if he or

14. Please note that “parental lack of attention” could also be seen as a very ethnocentric perception of the Roma community, and an example of a missing link between school and pupils’ families (O’Nions 2010; Themelis and Foster 2013).

she has help from a Roma teaching assistant, the school situation of children with special needs may improve considerably.

It also seems vital to educate those who teach Roma children about the distinctive features of Roma culture. Workshops of this nature should not only be introduced for teachers currently working with Roma students, they should also be included in teacher-training courses to provide future teachers with knowledge of intercultural contact and the potential difficulties associated with this. It would also be advisable to make teachers more familiar with a “deeper” layer of the Roma culture – the values and beliefs which lie behind the visible (and often incomprehensible) behaviour of Roma men and women. Cultivating only elements of Roma culture such as music, dance, and art (which is what usually happens) rarely brings about an authentic understanding of this culture. It is the most external layer of the culture, and while it is perhaps the most interesting and exotic, it is not enough to enable comprehension of the central values of Roma culture, and certainly not sufficient to build recognition of this culture among ethnic Poles.

Another issue worth addressing is that Roma parents have very different attitudes towards the education of their children and learning the Polish language. They often fear that this will threaten the Roma culture and will promote their (often unwanted) assimilation into the Polish community. Therefore, it is an important task for teachers and Roma assistants to allow Roma children to maintain their cultural autonomy while still including them in the school community. In some schools, events like “Days of Roma Culture” are arranged. Such events give Roma children and their parents an opportunity to present their own culture and how it is maintained. This is a positive example of activities that can strengthen the social integrity of the group in Polish society while maintaining its native cultural heritage and the associated sense of pride. As school education is not perceived as a way for children to gain wisdom (which in a Roma culture is associated with different activities and values, see: O’Nions 2010; Themelis and Foster 2013), it should be made apparent that education provides Roma children with many opportunities and potential advantages such as more numerous opportunities on the labour market in the future, or a better quality of life (Kwadrans 2007; Osuch and Dwojak 2009).

A crucial role in this respect should be played by Roma activists and Roma NGOs. They should strive to change fear- and neglect-based attitudes towards children’s education among Roma parents by providing examples of the successful careers of Roma people who have achieved undisputed success in mainstream society, but without breaking the Roma code of behaviour (*Romanipen*). This specification of harmonized success stories is vital because some professions (like medical doctors or nurses) which are highly regarded

in mainstream society, are despised among the Roma since they violate the rules of this code. Roma NGOs should also disseminate a new model of a Roma woman who follows both the cultural role of wife and mother and her own professional career as an educated person. The current, dominant practice of gender-role performance in the Roma community in Poland obstructs any educational pursuit for girls, who are predominantly seen by their families as future wives and mothers (sometimes as young as 12) for whom education is not necessary because their husbands will provide for them. Accordingly, boys also see themselves, and are seen as, a person who can, at best, perform only menial, temporary jobs for which no education is required. They simply have no other readily available professional role models among their fathers and other male members of their family.

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