

# A NEW APPROACH? LET'S DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY!

Guiding Ideas For Teachers  
On How To Work with Roma Pupils Effectively  
Based on our Polish Colleagues' Experiences



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## INTRODUCTION

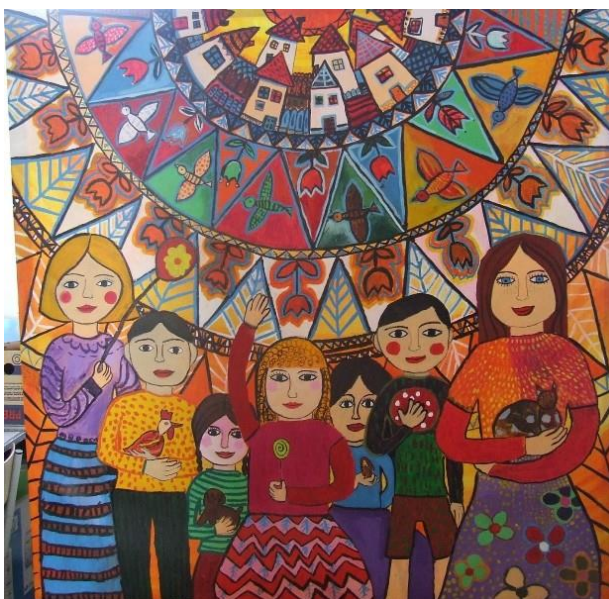
In the years of political transformation of the late eighties, Poland and Hungary started on a similar level. Both countries had similar tasks to perform in social, economic and educational fields and they had similar opportunities available to them. That explains why it has been useful for the Hungarian leading partner to follow Polish development policy closely and compare it with the Hungarian way, to consider which level both countries have reached and how they have performed recently.

Both countries faced serious problems at the beginning of the nineties. The living conditions of their Roma populations sharply deteriorated and their situation became very difficult. The volume of Roma ethnic groups living in Poland lags far behind that of the Roma living in Hungary: both in their total number and the proportion of them in comparison with the entire population. Their way of living, social stratification, their oral culture and traditions, their social status and problems however show surprising similarities in both countries.

When trying to find a solution, the politicians and teachers in the two countries have covered the same conceptual routes – but neither country has found „perfect” or „final” answers. Many people say that a perfect solution might not even exist for the problems mentioned.

Polish experts started a promising national project in 2001 under the title: **„Program for the Roma community in Poland”** This complex project encompasses a number of sectors – the labour market, health, social, cultural and educational fields – and focuses on the idea that the social disadvantages of Roma minority groups can be permanently and effectively diminished by helping Roma pupils to achieve educational success.

The problem seems to be fairly complex. That explains why no single-minded „uniform answers” can be given to the questions which would offer fast solutions and could be applied far and near. But even small results can teach us some useful ideas – the observations and recommendations of other practitioners should be improved and tested then properly transformed to correspond to the specific needs of any country or region and can then be built into daily practice.





## 1. PEOPLE WORKING WITH ROMA CHILDREN

This Programme – alongside a number of different provisions – started employing supporting teachers and Roma assistants in Poland to deal with Roma pupils who were seen as being disadvantaged in Polish schools. They aimed at improving their educational achievement and facilitating cooperation between Roma families and schools.

**Supporting teachers** were appointed who had been trained to deal with Roma pupils and had special expertise to develop the pupils' personalised skills and capabilities. **Roma assistants**, chosen by the local Roma community, on the other hand, who are fully aware of, and can stand up for the children's needs and interests, were seen as suitable people for bridging the gap between Roma families and schools.

In one **integrated class** of the Programme a maximum of twenty students are taught and only five of them can be of Roma ethnicity. Supporting teachers are employed by the schools and are commissioned with the task of supporting the learning activities of Roma children studying in different classes and of focusing on their individual needs. Roma assistants work across several institutions of the area and are paid by the central Programme.

### The conditions of educational success

The Programme held a training session for Roma assistants and supporting teachers in Wroclaw in 2005 and asked the participants to gather different **items of competences** needed for teachers to deal with Roma children effectively. The following items were emphasized by most of the participants.

<b>Areas of knowledge and skills</b>	<b>How far is it</b>	
	<b>important for me? (1-10 scale)</b>	<b>typical in our school? (1-10 scale)</b>
proper knowledge of Roma culture and customs		
ability to create a safe environment		
protectiveness		
giving and gaining trust and respect		
empathy		
good communication skills		
showing firmness		
energy and ability to motivate and persuade others		
sense of humor;		
ability of giving support		
ability of accepting support		
openness, tolerance		
identifying other people's strengths		
ability to compromise		
patience, perseverance		

### How does all that work at our place/in our school?

- Why do you think Polish colleagues emphasize the above points of view?
- To what extent do we consider those points important when dealing with Roma children?
- To what extent do we realise/accomplish those points of view when working with Roma children?



## The roles and tasks of supporting teachers

When preparing the supporting teachers of the Polish Programme, special focus was put on the expectation that they should work with Roma children within the integrated groups as if they were **foreign pupils and of dual culture**. The reason for that is that Roma groups living in Poland still speak their mother tongue and preserve their traditional culture to a certain extent (more or less). In many cases, Roma children aged 5-6 years do not speak Polish well enough to cope with school tasks. **They may perceive the language in school to be a foreign one at the beginning**. That is the reason why Roma children can and must be identified as requiring special care.

<i><b>Duties of a supporting teacher</b></i>	<i><b>Do we/they need it?</b></i>	
	YES	NO
taking the special needs and interests of Roma children into account and supporting their school achievement in an individualized way.		
inform subject teachers about the abilities and development chances of children in need of special attention		
adapting the learning content and requirements to children in need of special attention		
adjusting the exercises of specific subjects to the capabilities of pupils		
checking the correctness of children's notes they take in their notebooks		
supporting Roma children in understanding difficult commands caught by the majority		
assistance in completing difficult tasks if children have difficulties with them		
enhancing communication between children and school-teachers/subject teachers		
supporting school-teachers/subject teachers in assessing children in need of special attention		

### *What is the situation in our country/region?*



- Do we have to cope with the tasks listed above in our country/region, too?
- Who is currently responsible for performing the tasks listed in column „YES“?
- Would the language used in the school be considered as a 'foreign' one for some Roma children, if they are brought up in a family using other than the language of the majority of the country?
- What difficulties might Roma children face if the language of the school is 'foreign' for them?
- Would it be necessary for Roma children at a disadvantage to be mentored/helped by supporting teachers? Or is this practice not relevant in our country/region?
- Could we perform a few more additional tasks in our country/region which would raise the educational success/achievement of Roma groups?
- What can/should we do if we realize that some important tasks are not properly performed locally?

## The roles and tasks of Roma assistants

Roma assistants in Poland are well informed about the daily routines of Roma families and children, as they are **selected by the local Roma communities**. They feel at home in local societies and they are also familiar with the world of school. They do not often have higher education because the majority of Roma people, unfortunately, do not attend schools higher than primary. But they do **have the right skills** to perform their tasks. They can mediate between the culture of Roma families and the one of the school. Children can turn to them with any of their problems they face in school or in their personal life. Children can rely on the assistants because they will help them solve their difficulties and maintain their safety. They are fully aware of the importance of learning and as a consequence they can deliver positive ideas about schooling to Roma families. Meanwhile, they **keep informing the parents** about important aspects worth knowing in connection with their children's education.

Polish experience suggests that the revival of **communication between teachers and families** and the strengthening of mutual relations between schools and local Roma communities significantly contributes to the educational success of Roma pupils.

### How does it work in our school/region/country?

- How far is communication successful in our school between the teachers and disadvantaged Roma pupils?
- How often can we find a „common language” and cooperate with Roma parents?
- What sort of success do we have with this group and what are the factors that contribute to success?
- What are the features of our potential conflicts with Roma parents and what are the sources of conflicts?

<b><i>The most common challenges concerning Roma families for teachers</i></b>	<b><i>What do we do when the challenges are successfully faced?</i></b>

## 2. IDENTIFYING NEEDS

A **basic condition of pedagogical success** is to precisely identify the needs of the children/young people we work with. It is often a complex and difficult task. There are some important items we cannot **easily discover**. And there are some fields people would prefer to **hide**. It is good to know that Roma minorities in Poland – like in other European regions– form **well-proportioned minorities**. Roma groups more or less differ from one another in terms of language usage, customs, financial conditions, consumer choices and their relation to work. When planning the learning process of Roma children we should start identifying the needs originating from their **specific living conditions**. Quite independently of the fact that all of them make up a part of Roma minorities, they often differ in terms of physical, mental and intellectual needs.

### Roma families in the world of work

A small part of the Roma population in Poland adapt themselves to the situation in the labour market fairly well. These are the people who **trade with used cars and clothes**, for example. Their market position is facilitated by their contacts with the representatives of their group living in other European countries. This group, however, does not make up a significant part of Roma adults. The grey economy also includes a number of Roma people. But a **large proportion of the Roma population capable of work is unemployed**. A serious consequence of **unemployment**, following the political transformation, is that 80 percent of the Roma population have for a long time been basically dependent on the social allowances paid by the state.

#### *What is the situation like in our region/country?*

- Do you know how many parents of our school children are unemployed?
- In what way does the parents' unemployment impact on the school achievement of the children?
- How could we better support our school children whose parents are unemployed?
- What sort of mental, financial/material and technical support would those children need?
- Would you find any difference between the needs of Roma and non-Roma children whose parents are unemployed?

<b><i>Specific needs of children whose parents are unemployed</i></b>	<b><i>Possibilities of pedagogic and other kind of support</i></b>

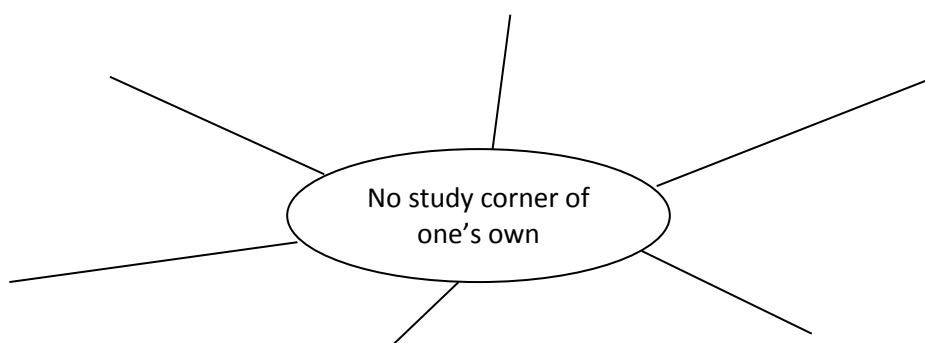
## The financial and material conditions for learning of children

Most Roma families in Poland have one major source of income, namely, **family allowance** which is paid to them based on the number of children brought up in the family. From another viewpoint it means that the majority of Roma children lack a number of things which are taken for granted by most of their classmates. It often happens that Roma children **do not have proper clothes** for the weather or **money for public transport tickets**. They often lack a **study corner of their own** at home where they **could learn peacefully** and do their homework.

Polish experts say that Roma children have to make a much greater effort than their school mates to achieve better outcomes at school. The majority of Roma children **never see any books or copybooks (in their home)** before they are seven. They never take pencils or brushes in their hands, consequently they do not know how to work with them.

### *What are the consequences of the above?*

What are the consequences concerning learning if children live in a flat/house/cottage where they lack a peaceful study corner, or where they can keep their school equipment, do their homework and get prepared for the following day.



POTENTIAL DIFFICULTIES	POSSIBLE FORMS OF SUPPORT

### 3. ATTITUDE TOWARDS LEARNING

There is a strong relationship between the high proportion of unemployed among the Roma in Poland and the fact that a significant part of them have finished **only a few classes** of primary school. The majority **do not have a trade** and **speak Polish poorly**. The data of the National Labour Office shows that one third of the Roma in Poland have not completed primary school, while only 0.8% of the population under study have university degrees. These are the circumstances which basically influence Roma parents' attitudes to learning and the extent of support they can provide their children with when doing school exercises.

Polish experts are deeply convinced that the majority of Roma children need special attention from their teachers to be able to learn successfully and to find the best way for them to progress. In addition, they need support to plan the various stages of their career and to work effectively to realize their aims.

#### Attitudes towards learning in Roma families

A number of Polish researchers have recently investigated the views of Roma adults about learning. They have come to the conclusion that many Roma adults do not understand the **continuous nature of learning**. Why is it so much important, they ask? They do not understand either, why their children are expected to learn for such a **long time**. Many Roma adults underestimate the importance of knowledge when personal prosperity is viewed. The researchers often met ideas held by the parents regarding their children, as follows:

*„It's enough for you to learn to write and read something or to put your signature”  
„What would school be to her? A girl must know how to cook, take care of the home, and switch on the TV. What more would one need?”*

If families do not place any value on learning, this fact is likely to spoil their children's chances of education. That is why it is important for teachers to recognise this situation and respond to it in a proper way.

#### How does that work in our school/country?

- How far do the parents of those children attending our school consider educational success as important? What do they take as a sign of success?
- Do we talk enough about this issue with the parents to make them understand why learning is essential for the future of their children?
- Which are the most important arguments we can offer to parents when talking about this issue?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_



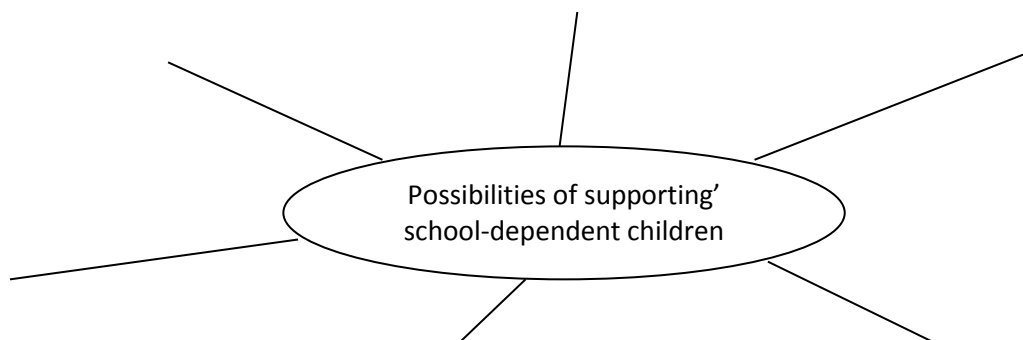
## Lack of family support

Many Polish researchers are of the opinion that most of the schooling problems of Roma children occur due to a lack of family support. As a result of parents' **low educational level** it might cause a problem even if parents are aware of the importance of knowledge and learning, and even if their children like going to school. **Children brought up in such families** become practically '**school-dependent**' – this is the case even if they are very much beloved by their parents. Schools and teachers definitely have a decisive role and responsibility in forming the future of those children.

It goes without saying that schools should never encourage children to confront their families – such an effort might only result in failure. If Roma children confront their teachers, they will lose professional support. If they stand up against their parents, they will lose the identity of their family. Handling this situation is not easy – only **emphatic conversations** with children and parents can result in an **atmosphere of mutual trust** and help children achieve success and find their own career path.

### *How does that work in our school/country and what can we do?*

- Who are the 'school-dependent' pupils in our school? What responsibility do we have to handle their situation?
- How can we describe our efforts to make contact with the parents of disadvantaged children? Do we consider them as real partners when having conversations with them?
- What are our opportunities and possibilities to support children whose parents cannot give them adequate help to achieve educational success?



### **FEATURES OF A CONVERSATION**

*offering us chances to gain the trust of Roma parents*

Place	
Time of appointment	
Form and style	
Participants	

## Inferiority and visions

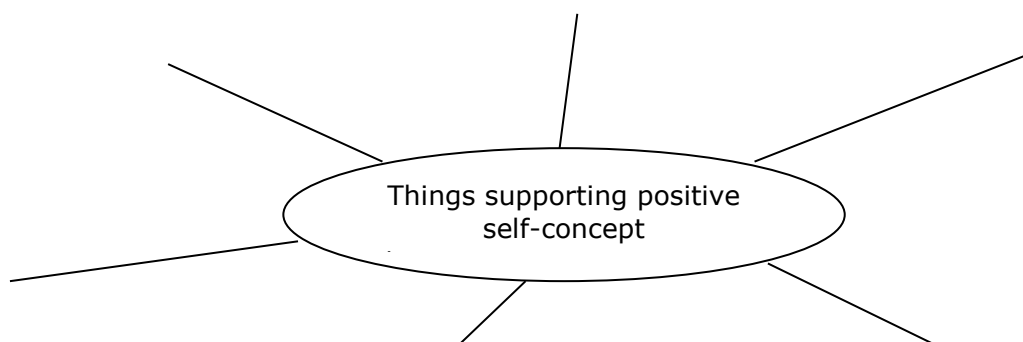
Roma parents experiencing social difficulties often transmit their **inferiority** to their children. As a consequence their sons and daughters are often convinced that whatever they do they will **never catch up with their Polish friends** – either at school or in the labour market.

The above can be easily traced in the results of a number of surveys in which Roma pupils of the final/graduating class were asked about their plans for the future. What do they want to learn and what trade would they choose? The majority of respondents (67%) talked about their plans of continuing learning, but only 17% selected a school type which would make tertiary education possible. Most of the girls wanted to work in the future as a hairdresser, beauty therapist or office administrator. The majority of boys wanted to work as a car mechanic or bricklayer in the future.

### *How does that work in our school/country?*

- Do we know what our pupils think about their future? As teachers should we know about their future plans?
- What do we think about our less successful students: what do we think they could achieve and how do they feel about their capabilities?
- How could we characterise their self-confidence and which factors influence their self-concept?
- What kind of tools do we have to help them improve their self-evaluation and self-confidence?
- To what extent is learning success influenced by their visions of the future, self-confidence, will power, their capabilities and supporting environment?

Vision	___ %
Self-confidence and positive self-evaluation	___ %
Will power, perseverance, being hard working	___ %
Capabilities	___ %
Supporting environment	___ %
TOTAL:	100 %



## 4 DIVERSE MILIEUS

Knowing about family customs, cultural traditions and norms of ethnic communities are very important factors of pedagogic effectiveness, very much like having information about the living conditions of our pupils. We should never forget that our pupils have been socialized according to the those factors and 'rules'. Families function as frames of primary socialization and their impact is often much stronger than that of institutions – particularly in the case of conflicting interests. Sometimes we teachers tend to forget about this relationship. **A lack of bridges between homes and schools** might often cause a basic source of educational failure when the behaviour rules of minority groups and the expectations of schools do not fit each other.

It goes without saying that we need not accept all family customs. We might find some factors which could set back or even endanger the development of children. It is not, however, practical to bluntly criticize or refuse to consider these community norms in question. Much better, if we talk with parents as equal partners and try to genuinely give the message of sharing concern for the future of their children.

### Roma 'code of behaviour'

Experts say that the behaviour of Roma people in Poland is regulated by the principles of an orally transmitted '**code of behaviour**/'**Code of Conduct**' – these independently form which ethnic group of the minority community they belong to. The behaviour of Roma children are influenced by this oral and traditional code. Breaking the rules may conclude serious negative consequences. The behaviour of Roma people can be **strikingly different in some fields from the behaviour norms of the majority**– a feature that can sometimes be difficult for the majority to understand.

### How does that work in our school/country?

Do Roma people also have their community rules in your country which guides their behaviour and differs sharply from the norms of majority?

IN WHAT FIELDS IS BEHAVIOUR DIFFERENT?	
<i>Roma minority</i>	<i>Majority of society</i>

## Non-territorial, nomadic life-style

Polish Roma people have given up a nomadic lifestyle. Nomadization was forbidden by law during the period of socialism in Poland and in Hungary. But in many European countries we can still find a number of Roma groups which have kept their traditional nomadic way of life. A non-territorial (unbound) way of life still attracts Roma people in many regions. It often happens in Poland that children do not go to school for extended periods because their families take long trips to see their relatives in other cities and even abroad.



### Questions

What reasons might Roma parents have in mind when their children do not go to school? Do we have precise information or can we only guess?

## Educating for self-determination

There are great differences in the fields of educating children on independence between parents of Roma and of those from the majority background. Roma children are independently released from home at an earlier age. For example, we can often see five or six-year-old children walking in the streets sent alone to do the shopping. Viewed by Poles this appears to be **extreme irresponsibility**, but in the opinion of Romas it is considered part of teaching self-determination from an early age. And indeed, we can often experience that Roma children are **more skilled in solving practical problems** than their Polish classmates.

### Questions

Do you also experience such a difference in family education? Can we say that our Roma children are more skilled in solving practical problems than their majority classmates coming from middle class families? If so, how can we, as teachers, build on such strengths of these children?



## The importance of kinship ties/cousinship

In Roma minorities a great deal of attention is paid to **cultivating kinship ties**, which are the basis of their social system, particularly in showing **respect for the elderly**. Roma children are subordinated to parents and the elderly. Their parents are convinced that being together with their children is the best option, even if they make long trips to see relatives in the middle of the school year or go begging together in hard times. This approach of Roma groups sharply contradicts with the values of the Polish majority, particularly in extreme cases.

### Questions

Why is it vital for Roma children to experience the feeling of belonging to their Roma community? Do we find it important that parents care for their children in a way that we would not consider to be the correct way?



## Emotional needs, feeling of togetherness

A significant feature of Roma children in Poland is that they maintain a strong **feeling of togetherness** with their group. They are capable of developing strong and close attachments and like to feel connected to others. They can be more emotional and they often **express their emotions** in a spontaneous way. They are capable of seizing the moment. Fear is a dominant feeling for many Roma pupils. As the majority is brought up by sharing the traditional emotional model of Roma life, they tend to show **respect for the elderly** and listen to their opinions – even in intimate and personal affairs.

### Questions

Which features described above are valid for the Roma pupils we teach? As teachers, in what ways can we develop greater empathy with them? Which are the most important conditions for that? Why is having empathy with our the Roma pupils significant?

## Marriage patterns

The greatest difference between the majority and minority cultures may be traced in the different traditions of marriage. Marriages take place very early in Roma families: girls can be married at the age of 14-15 and boys at the age of 14-17 years. Parents, therefore, expect girls graduating from lower secondary school to behave as adult women, to start a family, and not *"to waste time on learning."*

Marriages are usually arranged upon an agreement made between the parents of the young people, but even today the so-called abduction of women still happens. If a young Roma snatches the girl of his choice and the relationship is consummated, the parents of the girl, according to tradition, should recognize the relationship. Abductions are the reason for the close supervision that families put on their adolescent girls while in school, and of their frequent absences or non-participation in school trips.

## Questions

Does it ever happen in your country that Roma parents do not allow their daughters to participate in school trips or school camps –even if it is free of charge? If so, what should we do to encourage children to participate in joint school programmes?



## Rules of purity

Rules of purity –regulated by any culture – are less visible for outsiders but affect a society so much the more. "Unclean" food as considered by specific Roma groups is particularly curious to us. **Food** considered "unclean" is not suitable for human consumption. This may happen, for example, when it has had some contact with any parts of a woman's lower body, for example touched by a **skirt**, or which is considered "unclean", because it has been laundered in a basin in which women's underwear had been washed earlier.



A few Roma groups also prohibit girls from performing **dirty work**, for example working in the fields, or cleaning streets. But also, some professions related to the interior of the human body, to blood, for example, (in the case of a doctor or nurse) are denied to them.

### Questions

Are there any similar rules affecting the lives of our Roma pupils? If so, how should we respond to them?

### Managing conflicts

Rules prohibit the Roma from referring disputes to the non-Roma authorities of the society they live in. So even when Roma children are victims of nasty behaviour from their peers, they often do not want to talk about it with their teachers. In this situation the teacher should communicate the rules applied in school to all children in a very clear way.



### Questions

What rules apply in our school?  
Are they clear cut enough to establish common norms in an unmistakable way for all?

### Questions

What are the cultural characteristics of Roma pupils learning in our school? How can we integrate their culture in school life? In what forms and in what community events can we do this?

### Preserving identity or loss of culture

Many parents in Roma groups are interested in education and understand the role it plays in the future of their children. But they, too, are often dominated by the belief that the values and education within Polish schools are tools of acculturation which will complete the assimilation of Roma communities into Polish society to the extent of being absorbed and they will ultimately completely 'disappear'. On the other hand, many experts emphasize that schools should be a place, also in the eyes of Roma parents, where their children have real chances of learning in harmony with the rules of Roma communities and preserving their own culture. It is therefore important to remember not to oppose the cultural characteristics of the groups, but to see their diversity as a source of wealth.

## 5. STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICE

Many experts are of the opinion that stereotypes and prejudice against Roma children seriously hinder their learning success. Some say that **lack of openness** is an important cause that makes the integration of Roma children difficult in school life. Others think that Roma parents do not want to send their children to school due to a lack of acceptance and for fear of exposing them to **painful experiences**. Many share the opinion that it would be useful to organize school activities to support mutual openness which might encourage pupils of different ethnic groups in getting to know each other's culture. **Cultural diversity** produces a specific environment for the personality and creates important **human resources** both for the local community and the country as a whole.

### A sense of social distance

Numerous sociological studies have been conducted among Polish children and young people concerning minorities and have investigated the issue to what extent specific social groups would tolerate the closeness of people from different ethnic groups. These surveys have resulted in defining the sense of **social distance**. Experts have concluded the following results.



As for a direct question of tolerance, less than half of the respondents considered it important to be tolerant towards the Roma, a quarter answered 'no', and the rest had no opinion.

The question of acceptance of the Roma newcomer student brought analogous results. 20% of respondents believe that the rest of the class would not accept Roma pupils.

In school exchange activities only 3% of respondents would welcome Roma children at their homes, and 59% would not host Roma pupils.

### *And how does that work in our school/country?*

- What is the relationship like between Roma and non-Roma pupils in our school?
- Do any Roma and non-Roma pupils make friends in our school? How can we, as teachers, encourage friendships of that kind?
- Can we find any signs of ethnical conflicts? What can we do to avoid or solve such conflicts?



## Stubbornly surviving beliefs

In response to a question about the association concerning certain nations and ethnic groups, in the case of the Roma, the most common association was theft. (5) Stereotypes attached to Roma people in the Polish mind show a permanent nature which seems to be independent of age and of the specific experiences respondents might have had with Roma people and which contradict the stereotypes. When this is the case people often try to solve the contradiction by saying 'the exception proves the rule'.

### And how does that work in our school/country?

- Are there any features which are associated by non-Roma people with the majority of the Roma?
- And are there any features which are associated by the Roma with the majority of non-Roma people?
- What can we as teachers do to encourage Roma and non-Roma pupils to get to know valuable features of each other?

STEREOTYPES	
<i>associated with non-Roma people by the Roma</i>	<i>associated with the Roma by non-Roma people</i>

## Sociometry

Sociometric surveys carried out in schools investigate the preferences associated with the likes and dislikes of pupils and analyse the structure of their relationship. Pupils answering questions indicate three classmates with whom they wish or do not wish to remain in close social relationship: in this case sharing the same bench. Based on pupils' responses, this can distinguish the most **popular** person in the class ('sociometric stars' - most often mentioned positively) can be identified, and those **rejected** (usually indicated negatively) and also **isolated** persons (not even perceived by the class, either positively or negatively). In case of Roma children they often are part of couples or closed groups (showing mutual positive attitudes), which refer to the existence of strong **cohesive groups** among Roma children.

### And how does that work in our school/country?

- How can the sociometric place of Roma pupils in a class with a non-Roma majority be characterised?
- What are the reasons for Roma pupils being accepted/not accepted by their classmates?
- What can we, as teachers, do to encourage our pupils not to feel lonely or rejected?



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