

**Kristin NICKEL**

## ***From Segregation to Integration: An Alternative Approach to Education Among Roma***

*Diversity can be a blessing or a burden within an education system. In a town where three distinct communities coexist, but with significant divisions, the appropriate structure for an effective and fair local education system requires careful consideration.*

### **A TRANSCARPATHIAN CASE STUDY**

The ethnic composition of Szürte (Syrte), a village of 2,000 people in Transcarpathia, Ukraine, is roughly 55 percent Hungarian, 25 percent Ukrainian, and 20 percent Hungarian-speaking Roma. An education system that equally meets the needs of these distinct groups requires much more than the basic teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Although the community is divided along many different lines, the clearest division is that between Roma and Gadje (non-Roma). The reasons behind this division are complex and, for the most part, outside the scope of this article. This division, in the case of Szürte, is apparent in terms of geography, social status, and education level, among other factors.

The Roma in Szürte live in 'camps' that are physically separate from the other communities and generally at a much lower standard of living. Severe poverty is much more prevalent among Roma than among the Hungarian or Ukrainian communities.

The average level of education is also much below the Gadje communities and illiteracy is prevalent. Considering these factors, an education system that serves the needs of the Roma community would appear quite different from one that serves the Gadje communities. In Szürte, an alternative education system for Roma has become a reality.

### **THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF ROMA IN SZÜRTE**

For years, Roma attended the state school in Szürte. Classrooms are divided between Hungarian speakers and Ukrainian speakers and the Roma sat in the classroom along with the Hungarian children.

Some of the Roma children learned and progressed well, but they were the exceptional cases. On average, even after years of formal education, Roma children would be unable to perform simple tasks, such as writing their names. For a multitude of possible reasons, something was not working in the education system.

Perhaps prejudices were to blame. Many Roma students felt that they were excluded and isolated by their peers and their teachers. They often sat in the back row, and were more or less ignored year after year, passing from one grade to the next with little progress in their education.

The stereotype that Roma cannot be taught and that Roma hate education may have influenced the way the Hungarian teachers and students interacted with the Roma students. These factors likely restricted the Roma students' ability and willingness to learn.

Perhaps history was to blame. The majority of the current generation of Roma children in Szürte are being raised by illiterate parents. Parents of many of the Roma children do not place education as the first priority. On average, the children have little support in their education and often missed important developmental steps that are expected to occur before a child is of the age to attend school.

Other children never even began attending school. Some

Roma parents who are enthusiastic to support their children's education are limited by their own lack of education. Undereducation can therefore create a vicious circle that cuts across generations.

Perhaps poverty was to blame. Living in poverty often promotes a short-term perspective when looking at the future. Decisions must be made for survival now, regardless of what may be most beneficial for the long term. Perhaps many Roma parents are indifferent to their children's education because they do not see any clear benefit that would result.

In other cases, parents depend on their children's help to look after siblings, enabling the parents to seek income; or the children themselves are expected to be a source of income for the family. The result of these circumstances is irregular attendance at school. For some weeks the children may come, for other weeks they will not. For a teacher with a full classroom, it may be unrealistic to keep these students at the level of their regularly attending peers.

The problems associated with Roma attending the state school were multidimensional with several possible causes, but one thing was clear. In order for Roma children to receive a comparable education to their Gadje peers, something had to change.

### **THE MODEL: UNFORCED SEGREGATION**

The new model rose up out of the Roma community itself. Some of the educated adults in the community saw that the children were not progressing in their education and that many children were receiving no education at all.

In response, children began to gather in the homes of Roma and literate Roma adults began to teach them to read, write, and count. The movement was successful in getting many Roma children enthusiastic about learning, and eventually the gatherings became so crowded that they hardly fit into the homes where they met.

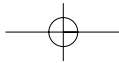
Approximately five years ago, a Dutch organisation learned of this movement and decided to support the community by constructing a school building where the children could come to learn. Together with members of the community, a two-classroom school was built, with a large second floor that could be used for community gatherings and the developing Reformed congregation within the Roma community.

Importantly, the school was constructed in the center of the largest and poorest Roma camp in Szürte. Two years ago, the doors opened and school bells began to ring, calling Roma children to a separate school.

Initially the students who attended were those that previously had not attended any formal school. Later the news about the school spread, and some of the Roma children from the state school chose to transfer to the exclusively Roma school. Many Roma children do still attend the state school and some of them are learning successfully, but many continue to be left behind.

Ideally, the pace of learning in the Roma school should exceed the pace in the state school, enabling the Roma children to 'catch up.' Currently the children range in age from six to sixteen and are officially at the first - and second-grade level.





Some of them have been attending the state school for as many as eight years. Some of them began their formal education as they were approaching their teenage years. The range of ages and abilities within a classroom is wide, but given that there are forty students and five teachers, the children are receiving much-needed attention.

In the morning, the children have a devotion followed by the traditional classes taught by state teachers. Then they receive a hot lunch provided by the state. In the afternoon, they have an after-school program with time for completing homework and enrichment activities, led by Hungarian and foreign volunteers who commit one year to working in the school.

It is a full day for the children and they are sent home to read independently each evening. The attendance pattern of many of the Roma students continues to be irregular, but the teachers work in hope that no child will fall behind.

The success of the model is apparent in that over the past two years, because of dedicated teachers, the education level of the students has progressed dramatically. Their confidence has grown and so has their ability, but they are still remarkably behind their Gadge peers. Despite the clear benefits associated with the school, the question remains: what is the social cost of segregating the Roma students?

**THE HOPE: INTEGRATION**

The Roma school in Szürte was not built to promote the segregation that exists between Roma and Gadge. Indeed, there are only two classrooms in the Roma school, which is certainly not enough space to educate all Roma children for their complete primary and secondary education.

The intention of the separate Roma school is to provide the children with a base necessary for them to successfully continue at the state school. The hope is that a strong foun-

ation will teach the children how to learn and enable many Roma students to study at the levels of their Gadge peers.

For now, this remains as only a hope. After one more year, the Roma children who have attended the separate school for three years will be asked to return to the state school to continue their education. Many of them have bad memories of attending the state school; others have great fears of leaving the safe walls of the Roma school.

However, when the students who have achieved appropriate levels are asked to switch schools, they will be better prepared and hopefully capable of making the transition. Perhaps this will also challenge the stereotypes commonly held by Hungarians about Roma.

When the students prove they can perform in school on the level of their Hungarian peers, one can only hope that they will earn a new level of respect and alter the reputation of Roma in Szürte. Only time will tell what these children can achieve.

The education model being employed in Szürte has the potential to confront many of the challenges that are perpetuating a vicious cycle of undereducation among generations of Roma in the village. It requires the support of the Roma community, international support that finances some of the special needs, and state support that can support integration.

Although change will certainly be gradual and involves initial segregation along ethnic lines, hope remains that this model will be a way to promote integration in a divided community.

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**Louk Box**

***The Great Transformation in Higher Education – Into Something Rich and Strange?***

*Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.*  
Shakespeare, Ariel's Song in *The Tempest*

*The world of higher learning has changed more over the past decade than it has over the past century. It is now more international than it has been for centuries. The university, once anchored in the nation state, is increasingly international in character, and higher education is one of the sectors that is globalising most rapidly.*

*Globalisation processes have their own dynamic, generally associated with the emergence of new market-structures and a different role for the state and for public interest institutions based in civil society. In this article, I argue that the Great Transformation in higher education has drastic consequences for international education and for institutions that are associated with it, such as the Institute for Social Studies (ISS).*

*I argue that traditional international education has had its time. If we are to reap the benefits of half a century's investment in human capital and institutional development, a drastic transformation is called for. In the process, however, a uniquely efficient and effective form of international cooperation can help maintain diversity in a globalising system of higher education.*

**TRANSFORMATIONS:  
WAGENINGEN–MAASTRICHT**

What are the transformations that are confronting us? An example: Wageningen Agricultural University in the early 1980s. The occasion: a debate in the University Council on the so-called "internationalisation" of the University. The rector had just presented a plan; students and staff voiced their reactions.

The one I remember most clearly was by someone who said: "Is this the end of Dutch in higher education?" It could not be; safeguards had to be promised for courses to be given and exams to be taken in Dutch, for it to remain the main language in the university. Times have changed. In 2005, international students make up half the student body in Wageningen University and, as a result, most of its graduate courses are taught in English.

Another place, another time: Maastricht University, September 2002. New international students in European Studies enter the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. International students had been there all along, but they were in the minority—20 per cent in 2001. The *lingua franca* was Dutch; messages on notice boards or in e-mails were in Dutch. Three years later, there was a curious mix of

