



**European Roma and Inclusive Education:
Notes on Promises and Shortcomings**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the policy and politics of inclusion of European Roma students into mainstream educational system. It argues that critical discussions around inclusion cannot avoid detours into examination of (self)exclusion, (self)separation, and the visions and ideals of more socially just education. In examining these topics, the paper contributes to the discussion on amalgamation of educational policies and practices that would acknowledge the possibilities, ambiguities, and setbacks of travelling practices such as inclusion.

Keywords: Roma, educational inclusion, exclusion, Decade of Roma Inclusion

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European Roma and Inclusive Education: Notes on promises and shortcomings

"I think that she [my mother] is right. Young ones who go to secondary school change into something that they're not. They're acting like country people. They're dressing like country people. They don't like jewellery no more. They don't like being a Traveller no more. They don't change in a good way. They're trying to be something that they're not. The point I'm making - the way you go in is the way you should come out with plenty of education but still proud to be a Traveller." (O'Donnell, 2007, p. 71)

The words of Geraldine, a young Traveller woman explaining her choice for not attending secondary school in Ireland, preface well what this essay is going to address: the policy and politics of inclusion of European Roma students into mainstream educational systems. While I strongly advocate European policies that are reflective of and responsive to the local conditions and nuances of Roma's cultural identities, I would also argue that travelling, comparing, and borrowing of ideas is inevitable in today's world. The sites of educational knowledge production, mobilization and representation are multitudinous, intertwined – and via technology – announced to the world. Critical discussions around inclusion cannot avoid detours into examination of (self)exclusion, (self)separation, and the visions and ideals of more socially just education. In examining these topics, the essay will contribute to the discussion on amalgamation of educational policies and practices that would acknowledge the possibilities, ambiguities, and setbacks of travelling practices such as inclusion.

Inclusion: What it Means and What it is Supposed to Do

Inclusion is not a new phenomenon. Actually, its ubiquitous presence prompted researchers to claim that definitions of inclusion are "all over the place, representing diverse perspectives and ideologies" (Smith, 2010, p. 38), causing confusion as to what it implies (Ainscow, 2007), or are used to describe practices that are not inclusive at all (Giangreco, 1997). Inclusion has become, in Edward Said's sense, a travelling theory and in this travel across time and space it lost its edge (Slee, 2011). Let us begin then by offering a short overview of the term.

The 1990 World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) envisioned inclusion as universal access to education for all children, youth and adults. Inclusion is a "process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners and can thus be understood as a key strategy to achieve EFA" and should guide all educational policies and practices (UNESCO, 2009, p. 8). Inclusion is warranted by several justifications: 1) *educational justification*, whereupon inclusive schools are required to educate all children together and develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences; 2) *social justification* means that inclusive schools are able to change attitudes toward diversity and form the basis for a just and non-discriminatory society by educating all children together; and 3) *economic justification*, which implies that it is

less costly to establish and maintain schools that educate all children together than to set up a system of different types of schools.

Roma students – despite all the directives, initiatives and proclamations – are still disproportionately placed in special education or segregated classes. In the school year 2008/09 Roma comprised 32% of students in special education and 38% in special classes in mainstream schools in Serbia (Open Society Institute, 2010). Walker (2010) found that approximately 70% of Roma students in Romania were placed in special education, with an important note that as of fall 2007, the official number of Roma with special education placement was not available. Roma Education Fund reported (White, 2012) that in the Czech Republic 28% of Roma children attend special schools, but make over 70% of the special school population. Approximately 60% of Roma children in Slovakia attend special education schools. That percent is between 20 and 90 in Hungary.

Certainly, the philosophy and practice of inclusion are not synonymous with special education (Ainscow & César, 2006; Giangreco, 1997), but, as Thomas Acton (1998) argued, “The perception of ethnicity as disability remains subliminally damaging, especially for Gypsies where the achievement of an antiracist approach remains fragile” (Acton, 1998 p. 15). Therefore, the topic of Roma inclusion is entangled with the ways educational systems act toward identity markers or “differences,” which do not necessarily coincide with bodily, emotional or cognitive impairments. In examining current educational laws in Hungary, Forray (2013) traces a practice of naming Roma students as either having “special needs” and therefore being relegated to special education classes (integration approach) or being viewed as socially handicapped or disadvantaged (inclusion approach) and included in regular classes. Either label signals that Roma students are not seen as part of the “all children” narrative that inclusive approach entails. The boundaries then between what constitutes integration and inclusion are more porous in practice than they appear in theory.

What practices are considered inclusive? According to Giangreco (1997) inclusion is an “educational equity and quality issue for *all* students because, when done well, it has the potential to benefit students with a full range of characteristics” (Giangreco, 1997, p. 194, emphasis his). Also, students with different characteristics and abilities share educational experiences and pursue individual learning goals with needed support and accommodations. Inclusive education enhances and values individually determined life outcomes for students and seeks a balance between the academic, social and personal aspects of schooling. Inclusion as a pedagogical and moral project is theoretically limitless, as there should be no limits to diversity and the right to participation for all. Yet in practice, this is not the case. In her meta-analysis of 18 countries that espouse inclusive education, Curcic (2009) looked whether policies were translated into practices and found commonalities in laws and regulations and their implementation. The schools’ philosophy and climate (i.e. more flexible notions of “normalcy” and “deviancy”), type of leadership, collaboration among teachers and administrators,

attention to diversity, material resources, and communication with parents play an important role in promoting inclusion. Curcic cautions against practices that superficially fulfil the idea of inclusion and actually function as exclusion – students are physically present in mainstream classrooms but are expected to assimilate and/or work on school tasks in isolation from their peers. Many would argue that teacher practices (pedagogy and assessment) are crucial here (Ainscow, 2007; Lingard & Mills, 2007). Acknowledging the Anglo-American paradigm of school reform that frames and mandates curricula and policies, thus often reducing teachers to the instrument of curriculum delivery, Lingard and Mills believe that research-based models of pedagogy should only ever provide a frame for teachers, not an order or instruction. Practice cannot be read off from research, nor can policy for that matter. (...) Socially just pedagogies require well educated teachers who know the research literature, but mediate it through a careful reading of the demands and specificities of their students, classes, locale and place and space of nation and globe. Trust of teachers ought to be a feature of socially just schooling systems and schools. (Lingard & Mills pp. 236–237)

How does Roma inclusion fare in regards to the school personnel's actions and broader context in which schooling occurs? The European Parliament in its 2011 report (Bartlett, Benini & Gordon, 2011) on promoting Roma inclusion in the EU with the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015) as a stamp initiative, enlisted policies that have sought to raise general educational awareness about the Roma people and create mechanisms to support the education of Roma children. The existing teacher education programmes have been modified and teachers have been provided extra training, special teaching assistants and youth workers have been appointed, special classes for Roma children have been abolished, the curriculum has been broadened to include the history and traditions of the Roma and focus on intercultural education. However, while the Decade is recognized as a fundamental step towards improving the living conditions of Roma, progress until now has remained limited. National Decade Action Plans are in place and all participating governments have established Decade coordination offices, but most governments treat Roma inclusion as sporadic projects and measures rather than programmes or integrated policies (UNICEF, 2010).

Bulgaria, for example, similarly to all Decade participating states, has a National Roma Integration Strategy, which translates into 10 tasks and 41 actions in the area of education, most prominently, the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Roma Inclusion Decade, the Plan of Action for the Educational Integration of Children and Pupils from Ethnic Minorities (2004/5–2008/9), the Action Plan for the Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society (2006), and National Programme for the Development of Primary, Secondary and Preparatory Education (2006–2015). Yet, due to the “lack of impact assessment studies, the knowledge base on the actual effectiveness of different education policies directed at Roma students is rather feeble. Therefore, it is not possible to provide a definitive account of the more

successful policy approaches compared to the less successful” (Bartlett, Benini & Gordon, 2011, p. 107).

On April 8th, 2013, the International Roma Day, the representatives of 13 Roma organizations sent an Open letter to the Bulgarian Prime Minister and members of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues, calling their attention to the rise of racism and anti-Roma rhetoric in Bulgaria. Demanding government action, the letter stated: “It is time for everyone to realize that the activities for integration and the combating discrimination are inextricably linked. It is unacceptable that the abuse of freedom of speech leads to the violation of basic human rights – the right to dignity and respect for Roma” (Integro Association, 2013).

These examples, wide-spread across Eastern Europe, demonstrate that the realisation of more inclusive approaches does not arise from a mechanical process in which any one specific organisational change or the introduction of particular techniques secures inclusion (Ainscow, 2007). Rather, it is the processes of deeper restructuring that the educational systems (and a broader society) are not willing to undertake. Examining the Decade’s initiative in Macedonia, Plaut (2012) argues that the state officials do not see themselves accountable to the Roma, fellow citizens of the state. Rather, the Roma are a problem to be outsourced and international “goodies” in the forms of money incentives, programmes, and initiatives supplied by international organizations and NGOs unfortunately feed right into such mindset. In addition, European political bodies that have the power to shape the policies disproportionately rely on quantifiable – and often simplified – indicators to determine the success of a policy. For example, the 2010 UNICEF report states that educational research needs to “identify and document a number of replicable, validated, and successful projects, policies and practices in secondary and primary Roma education that have the potential to be mainstreamed into government systems at all levels” (UNICEF 2010, p. 10). Validation is defined as a model or practice that has been “tested, evaluated and documented, usually by external individuals or institutions” (ibid. p. 10). Such discourse understands education as having an immediate and tangible cause and effect relationship, a positivistic residue manifested in many cases as mere counting the Roma students present in classrooms, without taking into account the qualitative aspects of schooling that could reveal what goes on behind the closed classroom doors (Curcic & Plaut, 2013).

Schooling as is and the Roma: Other Options?

Discussing the ideological nature of educational inclusion, Australian educator Roger Slee (2004) wrote: Inclusive schooling is an ambitious project, given that we seem to be commencing with an oxymoron as our organizing concept. Schools were never really meant for everyone. The more they have been called upon to include the masses, the more they have developed the technologies of exclusion and containment. (Slee, 2011, pp. 47–48)

Furthermore, school curricula that guide students towards the accomplishment of “being educated” are defined by those who are already “inside” and decide not only what constitutes academic achievement but who should be included and on what terms. Curriculum, whether denoted inclusive or not, then becomes an obstacle to inclusive education because those who do not or cannot conform to its specifications remain on the fringes (Osberg & Biesta, 2010). Given that the phenomenon of alternative ways of schooling, most notably charter schools in the US has gained ground, the question is, are there valuable lessons in the US context that could benefit educational policies and practices aimed at Roma education in Europe?

Charter schools are promoted in the US as school choice, meaning a choice for parents who are disappointed in and disillusioned with public education. Charter schools are usually small, deregulated institutions, that is, free from direct state control and “mediating the space between individual families and the state educational system” (Wilson, 2010, p. 649). They are also viewed as voluntarily segregated schools, operating on the “separate but equal” principle and the argument, strong among its supporters, is that such schools can overcome the deep-seated patterns of educational inequality. Advocates of charter schools point to the demand of this way of schooling by parents in minority communities (in Orfield, 2003).

According to the 2011 data, there are approximately 5,600 charter schools in the US, serving more than two million students (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2011). Since passing the first charter law in 1991, the topic generated numerous research as well as discussions in popular discourse. The researchers have stressed the tentative nature and great variability of their findings in relation to academic achievement of charter school students when compared with their public school peers, usually expressed via test scores in reading and mathematics (Bets & Tang, 2008; CREDO, 2009). I will focus on the studies concerned with two intertwined issues that at their core reveal philosophical and ideological differences around the question of democratic citizenship and whether it is best secured through integrated education. Related to this question is the dilemma: Do charter schools further promote or alleviate inequality? These questions, pertinent to the US educational context echo the problems surrounding inclusion of Roma students in European schools. Despite the reluctance of using “Roma” and “race” as part of the same discourse, the “separate and unequal” descriptor of Roma education (O’Nions, 2010) does resemble the experiences of racial minorities in the US and their struggle to secure more just education.

Charter schools emphasize the “power of individual action and decision-making” (Erickson, 2011, p. 41) and hush up the influences of politics, since “most charter schools remain creatures of the school district in which they reside [...] and school districts demonstrate striking segregation by race and income” (Erickson 2011, p. 44). To the charter school critics, the idea that voluntarily segregated schooling is based on individual choice is a sore spot. Erickson claimed,

“When we trace the rhetoric of choice across the decades, we see that it has migrated from describing an obstructionist power held by white, middle-class families to a supposedly curative one increasingly offered to poor families of color. Rarely in American history have public goods moved from doing service for the elite and powerful to become tools for disadvantaged communities. When the rhetoric suggests that choice has become such a tool, we should pay close and skeptical attention.” (Erickson, 2011, p. 46)

In their defence of voluntary separation and the idea and practice of African-centred schools, Merry and New (2008) point out that such schools cannot possibly segregate their students any more than they already are in public schools and society as a whole. Multiculturalism and diversity serve to alleviate white guilt and integrated schools continue to promote white economic interests and cultural values. It could be similarly argued that charter schools – at least those created by marginalized groups around their own interests – may be promising spaces of civil society in that they create a counter-public space where “otherness” feels safe. At the same time, charter schools run the risk of abandoning the larger goal of integrated education, where students and parents are engaged in matters of common concern. “Otherness” created in this way is detrimental to public exchange (Wilson, 2010).

Do charter schools prevent mutual understanding and interaction among different racial, gender and class groups? Terri Wilson uses an example of an all African American girls school and questions the possibility of communication mechanisms being established between these girls and, say, white boys. Is there an underlying assumption here that interactions across multiple differences that prepare youth for broad public participation occur in public schools? US public schools are segregated on multiple levels – across race, ethnicity, class, years spent in the country, academic achievement – and to add a detail that complicates the story even further: few immigrant students establish sustained close relationships with their white (American) middle-class peers, which means it is “very unlikely they will internalize the white middle-class Protestant ethos that served as the point of reference in previous waves of migration” (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco & Todorova 2008, p. 81).

This finding echoes Geraldine’s narrative from the beginning of this essay. The discrepancy between what mainstream education offers and what Roma parents and students wish it offered is called by O’Donnell (2007) “contrasting lifeworld logics, values and norms where the legitimate order of one is perceived, if perceived at all, as illegitimate or alien by the other” (O’Donnell, 2007, p. 71). Also, overt racist behaviour of students and covert racism from teachers and school personnel makes a school environment hostile and it is no wonder that Roma parents are anxious about their children’s physical, social and emotional well-being (Derrington, 2010). Does disengagement and self-exclusion seem then like an irrational choice? Valeriu Nicolae (2012) addresses this dilemma head-on:

“It might be that education is the solution for the majority populations. Aggressive education against the myths of nationalisms, about the many racist-based genocides, about colonialism, slavery and looting on which most of the European and North-American wealth is built on... This would most certainly have a much stronger impact than any Roma-focused programs on education.” (Nicolae 2012)

I am not arguing against inclusion of Roma children into mainstream educational system. I am questioning, however, the rhetoric of inclusion which operates within the nation state schooling that includes the Roma under the values and practices compatible with assimilation and normalization. I concur with Michael Merry (2012), who, arguing against segregation based on concentrated poverty, racism and violence, cautions educators not to dismiss outright the notion of self-separation since

“There is a heavy price to be paid for the forced incorporation into so-called mixed environments in which many are not made to feel welcome in the first place; where, in schools, children are labeled and sorted, adverse effects on self-image are widespread, and cultural histories are misshapen or left untold.” (Merry, 2012, pp. 476–477)

Conclusion

As long as the very term “special needs” remains unchallenged, little can be done to transform educational discourse (Liasidou, 2008). Roma children’s needs could be dressed up as special educational needs or social handicap (that requires special educational practices), but they remain a dress-up for “charitable dispensations to excluded minorities” (Slee, 2011, p. 107). Roma students that are mainstreamed into the classrooms and then tested, classified, remedied and re-rested in the name of achievement prescribed by PISA or TIMSS is a move towards narrow-minded micromanaging of children (and teachers) supported by equally narrow-minded scientism in the service of multinational edu-businesses. It is not surprising that as much as we claim how we want to include the Roma, many Roma do not want to be included in such a system. It is crucial that for policies to work we must be willing for an interpretive analysis of an entire educational system, or as Luke (2011) proposes, we must rely on “an understanding of everyday cultural practices, of diverse communities and demographics, of contending ideologies and relations of power, and of human beings who make that system what it is” (Luke, 2011, p. 374). And whilst we continue to envision and struggle for more democratic education, we must not reflexively assume that current forms of public/compulsory schooling are the best venue for attaining knowledge and ensuing democratic participation. Roma children and their parents have long been disillusioned with schooling as is and exploring alternative ways of educating cannot be any more easily dismissed.

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