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Education as a tool in the Roma inclusion policies

ETUCE Statement for the Education Council meeting (20 May 2011)

ETUCE calls for the European Union institutions and the Member States to highlight more intensely the role of teachers in the EU and in national education policies on Roma inclusion.

ETUCE, the European Trade Union Committee for Education represents 135 Teacher Unions in Europe and 12.8 million teachers from all levels of the education sector. ETUCE is a Social Partner in education at the EU level and an Industry Federation within ETUC, the European Trade Union Confederation. ETUCE is the European Region of Education International.

ETUCE welcomes the fact that the Hungarian Presidency puts forward the Roma issues in its agenda as discrimination and social exclusion of the approximately 10-12 million Roma EU citizens remained an unsolved problem in the 21st century. We support that the recent EU policy papers¹ recognise that strategies for social inclusion of Roma can be effective by including all four pillars of Roma integration, namely education, employment, health and housing. ETUCE welcomes that education has a central role in the strategy.

ETUCE is in favour of the approach that school attendance of Roma children is highlighted from the viewpoint of improving early childhood education and care. We agree with the Draft Council Conclusion, which pays special attention to Roma women and girls who are the most vulnerable in terms of social exclusion. ETUCE welcomes that the policy paper condemns the segregation in education and the practice of labelling schools as disadvantaged.

However, we would like to emphasize our following concerns:

1. The approach of the EU policy papers is strongly one-sided. The analysis of the Roma situation provided in statistical data and by researches misses to include the views of Roma intellectuals, teachers who teach Roma, Roma language and culture teachers, Roma experts and Romanology scientists. We emphasise that creation and implementation of EU and national strategies cannot be effective from a top-down approach: people with significant knowledge and real experience in the Roma culture, habits, and traditions have to be invited as advisers.

¹ Commission Communication: EU Framework for National Roma Integration strategies up to 2020; European Parliament resolution on the EU strategy on Roma inclusion; Draft Council Conclusions: The EU framework for national Roma integration strategies, and Council of the EU Discussion Paper: Prevention policies to combat early school leaving aimed at children with socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including Roma.

2. Education draws upon a holistic inclusive approach to lifelong learning for all. We call for the EU institutions and the Member States to invest more in education as inclusive, high quality education accessible to Roma consists of many challenges: continuous teacher training, special teacher training material, alternative learning methods, curricula design, training of school mediators, employing more social workers, setting up guidance and counselling, etc.
3. The European and national Roma strategies must address not only the challenge of providing access but also of the rate of early school drop outs. The school education environment set up centuries ago to serve our Western societies has failed to satisfy the Roma and the Roma culture. Open-classroom methods, alternative ways of teaching can help to decrease early school-leaving not only of Roma, but also of other migrant, socio-economically disadvantaged young people. Significant investment and involvement of Roma experts in education reforms is essential.
4. We strongly disagree that the policy papers on Roma inclusion and the recent education policies of the European Union institutions envisage the teachers in too many roles while they do not encourage the Member States to build up efficient and effective strategies to protect and support the teachers under the accumulated responsibilities. The European Commission considers the teachers both as educators of a class and of individuals, as continuous learners, researchers, administrators, parents and student counsellors and reformers who are able to renew their methods at any time, etc. At the same time the teacher population is ageing, teachers were dismissed as a result of the crises in many EU countries, their workload has increased alongside a higher rate of children per class, while their salary is not rewarding. Considering these facts, the Roma inclusion strategy papers merely increase teachers' responsibilities without providing suggestions how teachers can prepare "to cope with new demands" nor who will pay for their continuous development or how replacement of teachers will be ensured while they are in training courses. Thus, ETUCE calls for the EU institutions and the Member States to solve this issue of the teachers as integrated part of the Roma strategies.
5. In addition to teachers' professional development, where teachers learn to teach Roma and/or multicultural classes, teachers' personal development training should also be pointed out: attitudes towards other cultural groups and mutual understanding are relevant and need to be improved.
6. ETUCE agrees with the policy debate paper on incentives for teachers who work in disadvantaged schools. However, the EU institutions must take into consideration that this aspect may strengthen the segregation both in and of schools. It must be also noted that in the EU-12 Member States the whole education system needs to be prepared from scratch to teach Roma; therefore these incentives should reach the large majority of teachers and not only schools.

7. We invite the Member States to invest more in education in order to set up efficient education counselling and guidance services in all schools, which serve the students with disadvantaged backgrounds.
8. We stress that education has to be viewed from a holistic approach: it is unacceptable for the ETUCE that the policy paper of the Council debate² draws a parallel between drop-outs of disadvantaged students and so-called mismatches between education and labour market needs. Many Roma live in areas where the unemployment rate is the highest in the country (for instance in Central and Eastern Europe). Labour market relevance education probably will not motivate students in these areas to remain in school. All aspects of the education field should be tool to motivate children to remain in school and to contribute to their personal fulfilment.
9. Higher education institutions teaching teachers and teacher colleges need to be supported to involve Roma culture subjects in their curricula. It is also relevant that they prepare young teachers for specialized education for Roma adults.
10. Adult learning, especially long-term, continuous intergenerational learning must be improved: learning of Roma parents together with their children can contribute to a positive attitude of the Roma society towards education. Roma families are more supportive if the adult learning promotes adults' self-esteem by providing them with more than only classroom activities.
11. In order to ensure social support for the Roma students to remain in school and in an education and career path, the role of social workers and school mediators dealing with the children's families has to be underlined. The strategies cannot place all responsibility and workload exclusively on schools and teachers.
12. While supporting the Draft Council Conclusions on promoting Roma culture against discrimination, we emphasise that campaigns for inclusive Roma education must address mutual understanding among both Roma and non-Roma parents and children.
13. ETUCE would like to highlight that the EU and national strategies should take into account the sustainability of the measures sought in the implementation process.

² Prevention policies to combat early school leaving aimed at children with socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including Roma.