

Education of Romani education assistants as a condition of social inclusion of Romani society in Poland

Edukacja asystentów edukacji romskiej warunkiem inkluzji społecznej Romów w Polsce

Key words: Romani society, Roma teaching assistants, cultural assistant, adult education, multicultural education.

Słowa kluczowe: Romowie, asystenci edukacji romskiej, asystent kulturowy, edukacja dorosłych, edukacja wielokulturowa.

Streszczenie. Ważną rolę wspomagającą nauczycieli pracujących z uczniami romskimi pełnią asystenci edukacji romskiej. Funkcja asystenta edukacji romskiej oraz wymagania, jakie musi spełniać, zostały określone w *Pilotażowym Programie Rządowym na Rzecz Społeczności Romskiej na lata 2001–2003*. Potrzeba kształcenia asystentów edukacji romskiej ma na celu zapewnienie wszechstronnej pomocy uczniom romskim w kontaktach ze środowiskiem szkolnym, budowanie pozytywnego obrazu szkoły i przedstawiania korzyści płynących z wykształcenia w środowisku dorosłych Romów, zapewnienie wsparcia emocjonalnego dla uczniów romskich, nadzorowanie ich frekwencji i postępów w nauce, wspomaganie nauczycieli i pedagogów w rozpoznaniu potrzeb i ewentualnych problemów uczniów oraz udzielanie pomocy i podejmowanie mediacji w sytuacjach trudnych i konfliktowych. Podjęcie przez autorów problematyki funkcjonowania zawodowego asystentów edukacji romskiej ma umożliwić zrozumienie problemu „cygańskiej duszy” głęboko osadzonej w społeczno-ekonomicznych i kulturowych warunkach ich grupowej egzystencji. Asystenci kulturowi są kluczowym ogniwem w procesie integracji społeczności większościowej z mniejszościową.

Introduction. The analysis of the literature on the subject and statistics shows that the Romani are the least socially integrated minority and are not always prepared to function efficiently in the increasingly complex reality of the modern world. The low level of education among the Romani, which prevents access to the labour market, and the resulting lack of or minimum economic autonomy, is the reason for this group being socially disliked by the majority society and is the basis for the manifestation of its discrimination. Raising the level of Romani education which would allow them to enter the labor market is a condition for changing this situation. Without strengthening this factor, all other accompanying activities will have low efficiency. Therefore, the

authors emphasize the need to educate Roma teaching assistants as one of the basic pillars of strengthening the integration of the Romani with the majority society.

Socio-political situation of the Romani in Poland. Romani are currently the largest minority group in Europe, counting from 10 to 12 million people¹. Statistic data shows that in the year 2011, 16,723 Polish citizens declared to be members of the Romani ethnic minority, including: in Dolnośląskie Voivodship – 2,028, Małopolskie Voivodship – 1,735, Śląskie Voivodship – 1,733, Mazowieckie Voivodship – 1,531, Wielkopolskie Voivodship – 1,221, Łódzkie Voivodship- 1,193, Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodship – 1,080, Opolskie Voivodship – 1,078, Podkarpackie Voivodship – 1,023, Zachodniopomorskie Voivodship – 1,002, Lubelskie Voivodship – 794, Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodship – 772, Podlaskie Voivodship – 527, Świętokrzyskie Voivodship – 381, Lubuskie Voivodship – 502, Pomorskie Voivodship – 125. Unofficial statistics show that there are from 20,000 to 25,000 Romani living in Poland. The Roma minority belongs to five groups: Polish Roma, Carpathian Roma, also called Bergitka Roma or Polish Highlander Gypsies, Kalderash and Lovari, as well as Sinti which is a small group in Poland. These tribes differ in cultural, social and economic terms².

Compared to other minorities, the Roma ethnic minority is the only minority threatened by social exclusion. This diagnosis results from a number of social and cultural factors. First of all, the low level of education of this group, which directly affects the lack of qualifications desired in the labor market, and thus the living and health situation of the Romani. The hermetic nature of some of the traditional Roma communities, which defend their independence, is of great importance here³.

The changes that have taken place in Poland after 1989 have enabled institutional changes to be made towards Romani as well as other national and ethnic minorities. The Parliamentary Committee on National and Ethnic Minorities was established on 2 August 1989⁴. The most important result of the Committee's work was to initiate discussions on the need to develop the bill on national and ethnic minorities. The

¹ See *National Roma Integration Strategies: a first step in the implementation of the EU Framework*, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 21.05.2012, p. 2. As well as: A. Mirga, N. Gheorghe, *Romowie w XXI wieku. Studium polityczne*, Kraków 1998, p. 9.

² Data based on: *National Census of Population and Housing in 2011* Most Romani in Poland constitute an urban population. They live mainly in larger cities throughout the country. The Roma population is 8,604 women and 8,119 men, including 10,840 people of working age. In the *National Census of Population and Housing in 2002*, 12,731 Polish citizens declared to be members of the Roma community, and 15,657 citizens declared that they use Roma language at home.

³ See T. Paleczny, *Spoleczno-kulturowe podłoże wykluczania: przypadek dzieci romskich w szkołach specjalnych w Polsce – kilka ogólnych refleksji*, [in:] *Raport końcowy z projektu badawczego „Funkcjonowanie poznawcze i językowe dzieci romskich uczęszczających do szkół podstawowych specjalnych i masowych – konteksty społeczne”*, M. Kołaczek, J. Talewicz-Kwiatkowska (ed.), Stowarzyszenie Romów w Polsce, Oświęcim 2011, p. 10–19.

⁴ See H. Pajdała, *Komisje sejmowe. Status i funkcjonowanie*, Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warsaw 2003, p. 19–20. Currently the tasks of this commission are performed by the Joint Commission of the Government and National and Ethnic Minorities.

general principles for the protection of minorities were reflected in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 1997⁵. The Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment, which was created in December 2001, became an important institution responsible for Roma affairs⁶. The main tasks of the Plenipotentiary were the dissemination of knowledge on discrimination, cooperation with non-governmental organizations as well as the initiation and elaboration of legal acts aimed at supporting national and ethnic minorities. When writing about government administration in the context of the Roma minority, the role of the voivodes implementing the government policy at the regional level cannot be ignored. In 2000, at the request of the Minister of the Interior and Administration, all voivodes appointed plenipotentiaries for national and ethnic minorities. Over the years, the Polish authorities have issued a number of legal acts to provide support and protection to minorities. Here, it is important to mention the following:

1. *Act of 6 January 2005 on national and ethnic minorities and on the regional language*⁷,
2. *Regulation of the Minister of Interior and Administration of 30 May 2005 on the Official Register of Municipalities in which an auxiliary language is used*⁸,
3. *Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 14 November 2007 on the conditions and execution of tasks by kindergartens, schools and public educational institutions that facilitate the preservation of the sense of national, ethnic and linguistic identity of students belonging to national and ethnic minorities and communities speaking a regional language*⁹.

Discrimination, social exclusion and segregation, which the Romani face, made the European Union unable to ignore these issues. The issuance of directives and recommendations to the Member States was an expression of the commitment of EU institutions to the process of integration of the Roma minority¹⁰. Systematic actions have been taken already since 2011 when the Member States were called to “prepare, update or develop their national strategies for Roma integration or the integrated sets of policy measures within the frameworks of broader social inclusion policies”¹¹. The

⁵ Pursuant to Art. 35. of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland: *The Republic of Poland shall ensure Polish citizens belonging to national or ethnic minorities the freedom to maintain and develop their own language, to maintain customs and traditions, and to develop their own culture. National and ethnic minorities shall have the right to establish educational and cultural institutions, institutions designed to protect religious identity, as well as to participate in the resolution of matters connected with their cultural identity.*

⁶ Then under the name: The Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Status of Women and Men.

⁷ Journal of Laws No. 17, item 141, as amended.

⁸ Journal of Laws 05.102.856.

⁹ Journal of Laws of 2014 item 263.

¹⁰ *The Race Equality Directive* (2000/43/EC) prohibiting discrimination against the Roma people in the workplace and other areas of life such as education, health care and access to goods and services; and the *Directive on freedom of movement and residence in the Member States* (2004/38/EC), allowing Romani with European citizenship to move freely within the 27 Member States.

¹¹ On 5 April 2011, the European Commission adopted the *EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020*. Since April 2009, the *European Platform for Roma Inclusion* also

EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies is the basis for the social and economic integration of the Romani while respecting human rights. It is an expression of the political commitment of EU Member States; unfortunately, however, it is not a legally binding document.

According to the recommendations of the European Commission, it is necessary to take decisive actions, both at the national and at EU level, while holding an active dialog with the Romani. The basic responsibility for these actions rests with public authorities in the sense of creating the appropriate legal frameworks, working out effective mechanisms and providing financial means. However, the social and economic integration of the Romani is a bilateral process that requires a change in the attitudes of both the majority of the society and the members of the Roma community, as well as their ability to make effective use of the conditions created by the state¹².

Appointment of Roma teaching assistants. At the end of the 1990s, the difficult situation of the Roma community, especially in the south of Poland, and the inability of the self-governing authorities to deal with it led to special actions taken by the state administration¹³. On 13 February 2001, the Council of Ministers adopted the *Pilot Government Program for the Roma Community for the years 2001–2003*. It was supposed to improve the living conditions of the poorest part of the Roma community in Poland – Carpathian Roma (Bergitka Roma) living in Małopolska. The lack of early school and school education among the Romani caused the subsequent generations to inherit poverty, which in turn has led to a growing lack of social acceptance for this group.

A way to change this state of affairs was the establishment of the institution of the Roma teaching assistant under the *Pilot Program*. The area of its activities includes reducing differences in terms of habits and culture as well as improving the image of the Romani in society by:

- building a positive image of the non-Roma world in the local Roma society;
- maintaining regular contact with parents and teachers of Roma children;
- encouraging parents of Roma students to participate in school life;
- ensuring regular attendance of Roma students at school;

operates, which is composed of representatives of EU institutions, international organizations and governments of the Member States of key importance for Roma integration, whose purpose is the exchange of good practices and experiences.

¹² On 17 June 2010, the European Council adopted the *Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth – Europe 2020*. One of the issues tackled by the *Europe 2020 Strategy* is to ensure economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU Member States in order to increase awareness and recognition of the fundamental rights of the poor and socially excluded, giving them the opportunity to live a dignified life and to actively participate in social life. The tools used for implementing the “European Program against Poverty” include developing and conducting at the national level actions aiming to resolve the specific problems of the particularly threatened groups, including the Romani.

¹³ See J. Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, *Wpływ aktywności finansowej Unii Europejskiej na położenie społeczne Romów w Polsce*, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2013, s. 69–77; Also: E. Nowicka, *Romowie i świat współczesny*, [w:] *Romowie w Polsce i Europie*, P. Borek (red.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pedagogicznej, Kraków 2007, p. 125.

- passing on knowledge to (non-Roma) students and teachers about the history and culture of the Romani.

Due to the effects produced by the work of Roma teaching assistants, their activity is continued under subsequent editions of the strategy: *The Program for the Roma Community in Poland 2004–2013*¹⁴ and the *Program for the Integration of the Roma Community in Poland 2014–2020*¹⁵. The programs take into account the European Commission's guidelines which require the Member States to implement the Roma social inclusion strategy. At the same time, they use Poland's previous experience in working to improve the situation of the Romani. Education remains the priority of actions, as in previous years.

Roma teaching assistants are not employees having pedagogical qualifications (they are not subject to the Teachers' Charter Act). They are self-government workers having an auxiliary position in units which operate in the field of education, identified as teaching aids. In 2004, the profession of Roma teaching assistant was introduced to the official catalog of professions, in the group Personal Care and Related Workers¹⁶. In 2014, in the current version of the ministerial regulation, the profession of Roma teaching assistant (531203) was classified in the department of personal care and related workers (53), child carers and teacher assistants (531), child carers (5311)¹⁷. Since 2006, there has been a systematic change in the system of financing Roma teaching assistants. Initially, their work was financed by the *Roma Program*, which involved a considerable pool of funds. With time, it was possible to finance the employment of Roma teaching assistants from the increased educational subsidy. The data collected by the authors show that there are currently 97 Roma teaching assistants employed in Poland.

Roma teaching assistants help to understand the complicated Roma identity. On one hand, the Romani value their lifestyle, assess ethnic bond and solidarity very highly, while on the other hand, they are aware of the fact that it is the reason of their poor social position and gives rise to negative assessments on the part of the majority. In this context, Roma teaching assistants play a special role of the "interlocutor"¹⁸.

¹⁴ Program adopted on the basis of the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of 19 August 2003.

¹⁵ Program adopted on the basis of the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of 7 October 2014. The Program has put a great deal of emphasis on supporting this community through the need to formalize (or create) municipal strategies for supporting the Roma community in co-operation with local administration and the local community. Also, the adaptation of activities to the needs of particular self-government communities. The addressees of activities financed from the state budget and budgets of local government units will be both municipalities inhabited by the Romani as well as non-governmental organizations, including Roma organizations.

¹⁶ Based on the *Regulation of the Minister of Economy and Labor of 8 December 2004 on the classification of professions and specialties for the needs of the labor market and its scope* (Journal of Laws No. 265 item 2644, as amended).

¹⁷ Based on the *Regulation of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy of 28 August 2014 on classification of professions and specialties for the needs of the labor market and the scope of its use* (Journal of Laws 2014, item 1145).

¹⁸ See J. Nikitorowicz, *Tolerancja: idea i cel edukacji międzykulturowej*, „Problemy Opiekuńczo-Wychowawcze”, 1995, no. 6, p. 5. The issue of resignation from the authoritarian model of education and transition to a model based on communication and partnership is discussed by: C. Alix,

Table 1. Status of employment of Roma teaching assistants in Poland by voivodeship – status as at January 2017

No.	Voivodeship	Number of Roma teaching assistants
1.	Dolnośląskie	17
2.	Kujawsko-pomorskie	1
3.	Lubelskie	1
4.	Lubuskie	2
5.	Łódzkie	4
6.	Małopolskie	24
7.	Mazowieckie	5
8.	Opolskie	7
9.	Podkarpackie	3
10.	Podlaskie	2
11.	Pomorskie	1
12.	Śląskie	13
13.	Świętokrzyskie	2
14.	Warmińsko-mazurskie	4
15.	Wielkopolskie	2
16.	Zachodniopomorskie	9
IN TOTAL:		97

Source: *Own study, Data of the Voivodship Offices.*

The need for educating cultural assistants. Cross-cultural dialog can be an extremely valuable source of knowledge, both about the values accepted by representatives of other cultures but also about oneself and one's own cultural tradition. It should be remembered that the dialog does not consist in carrying one's point but, thanks to another perspective, in understanding or perceiving what our understanding or perception has previously eluded or what we have thus far understood otherwise. Roma teaching assistants are responsible for a successful dialog relation. Positive contacts mobilize and encourage further cross-cultural communication.

Educators point out that the education of Roma teaching assistants lies at the borderline of social pedagogy and sociology of education. The profile of the cultural assistant consists of:

- knowledge of Polish language and a foreign language, i.e. the language used by the students subject to the care of a cultural assistant;

G. Bertrand, *Pour une pédagogie des échanges*, EDICEF, Paris 1994; *Multicultural education for the 21st century*, C. Diaz (eds.), Longman, New York 2001; M. G. Amilburu, *Education and the Multicultural Society*, "The Proceedings of the Twenty-First World Congress of Philosophy" 2006, 4:1–6; L. Blum, *Recognition and Multiculturalism in Education*, "Journal of Philosophy of Education" 2001, 35 (4):539–559; *Socjopatologia pogranicza a edukacja*, T. Lewowicki, E. Ogrodzka-Mazur, A. Gajdzica (eds.), Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2008; J. Rutkowiak, *Odmiany myślenia o edukacji*, Impuls, Kraków 1995, p. 26; M. Nowicka-Kozioł, *Odpowiedzialność w świetle współczesnego humanizmu*, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogiki Specjalnej, Warszawa 1993, p. 154; *Spory o edukację. Dylematy i kontrowersje we współczesnych pedagogiach*, Z. Kwieciński, L. Wikowski (eds.), IBE, Warsaw 1993; Z. Kwieciński, *Socjopatologia edukacji*, Trans Humana, Białystok 1995, p. 123.

- ability to establish a relationship with the child;
- competencies within interpersonal communication;
- ability to cope with difficult situations, including the ability to reach an agreement;
- knowledge of the culture of the students’ country of origin, including the cultural differences between the Polish culture and the culture of the country of origin of the students supported by the cultural assistant;
- availability;
- knowledge of the education system in Polish schools and in the school of the country of origin of the supported students;
- organizational skills¹⁹.

Knowledge on the process of cultural adaptation and the rights of the student coming to Polish school from another culture is very useful in the work of a cultural assistant. Therefore, it is recommended that the person who performs this function at school, in accordance with the applicable rules and in order to improve his/her competencies, takes part in training which includes the subject of competencies of the cultural assistant. The arrival of a cultural assistant to the school should be preceded by his/her introduction into the working environment, which includes:

- a presentation of the topography of the school to the cultural assistant;
- acquainting the cultural assistant with the teaching staff as well as administration and maintenance staff;
- presentation of the assistant’s scope of responsibilities to the cultural assistant and to the teachers;
- familiarization of the cultural assistant with teaching materials;
- providing the cultural assistant with a room or place to work;
- designating a person who will maintain, on behalf of the school, contact with the cultural assistant.

The presence of Roma assistants in Polish schools is very important. They support children attending school and help children do their homework. By acting as cultural mediators, they also play the role of intermediaries between the school and the Roma community, a role that is hard to underestimate. Frequently, these people are the initiators of social changes, work intensively for the local community, and work in organizations associating the Romani. Therefore, there is an urgent need to create educational opportunities for Roma assistants, so that their pedagogical competencies make them the full-fledged partners for school teachers.

Conclusions. At the turn of the 20th and the 21st century, we were particularly entangled in diversity and volatility influenced by modernization and globalization, transformation and integration on one hand, and processes protecting locality on the other. We are thus dealing with a reduction of distances between people and nations, the shrinking of the world to the size of a “global village”. As J. Szempruch

¹⁹ *Międzykulturowość w szkole. Poradnik dla nauczycieli i specjalistów*, K. Białek (eds.), Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji, Warsaw 2015, p. 47–48.

emphasizes, currently one of the most important educational challenges is cultural sensitivity in direct contact with otherness²⁰. The social and cultural divide between Poles and the Romani manifests itself in the tendency towards spatial separation, social isolation, as well as ethnic segregation. The Romani live on the sidelines of Polish local communities while distance is kept on both sides. It is difficult to assess to what extent this mutual exclusion constitutes a kind of "feedback" and the consequence of a functional relationship with the need to preserve the cultural distinctness of both sides of the minority/majority relationship. However, it can be stated with certainty that the prerequisite for social inclusion of the Romani will be the education of Roma teaching assistants, who are the link between the Polish society and the Romani minority. The knowledge, competencies and skills of cultural assistants should serve the marginalization of the Romani's functioning in the social, economic and political sphere.

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²⁰ See J. Szempruch, *Nauczyciel w warunkach zmiany społecznej i edukacyjnej*, Kraków 2011, p. 8. More on the subject: V. Petrovska, S. Mirascievab, E. Petrova-Gjorgjeva, *Multiculturalism, globalization and the implications on education*, “Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences” 2011, no. 15, p. 1366; C. S. Weinstein, *Classroom management in a diverse society: introduction to a special issue*, “Theory into Practice” 2003, no. 42, p. 266.

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