

Educational Environment – A Social Project of Support for the Social Development of a Roma Child

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Received: 25 February 2020 ▪ Accepted: 19 April 2020 ▪ Published Online: 15 July 2020

Abstract

In the Bulgarian public space social distances and stereotypes regarding the Roma ethnicity are still difficult to overcome. This process' impact on the social development of the Roma child is an indisputable fact that has negative social implications when the child joins the school community. Predicting and overcoming these consequences implies conceptual researches amongst basic and innovative resources of teaching practice. The educational environment and its components have a social supporting effect in view of the permanent processes of social development of the child from the Roma ethnic group. There is no doubt that the teacher and the children from the class community have a stimulating role in this process.

Keywords: childhood, educational environment, social development, Roma child, educational process, pedagogical interactions, Roma community, social and cultural identity.

“One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings.”

Carl Gustav Jung

1. Introduction

The challenges in the contemporary social situation, as well as the consequences of them, undoubtedly influence the phenomenon called “childhood”, its characteristics, meaning and content. Nowadays childhood is a problematic area with inherent to its contradictions difficult to understand and solve not only by children but also by adults. In the scientific area, these stand out amongst them: difficulties in identification of the significant and necessary factors and conditions helping the actual child development, education and socialization; the occurrence of partial transformation of childhood at micro- and macro-social level; shortening the childhood period by including the child in adult activities; breaching the role of authentic factors from the close surrounding environment when “modelling” the childhood and determining the “steps” of its psychosocial development, etc. The occurred conflicts of course reflect on the subject of childhood, i.e. the modern child, the child of the 21st century who is often with its own vision and potential other from the adults' ideas (researchers, parents, and teachers) regarding their nature, individual

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features, opportunities for enrichment. The challenge in front of the social knowledge in this case is finding the child's process of social development and its dissociation from occasional, insignificant behavioral manifestations and interests that would rather be considered as a 'protest' against the unsatisfactory social environment.

As an addition to these contradictions and challenges in the public space, the prejudices, stereotypes, social exclusion, etc. related to ethnical groups are actively positioned. Their occurrence and existence creates a kind of algorithm of attitude and behavior towards "others", which in the childhood often places unstable grounds for the child's social development.

The opportunities for predicting and overcoming the challenges concerning the children society have a different vision. In general – the childhood phenomenon and the subject "child" in the 21st century need a new type of "reading" and a competent analysis. It is important that this "reading" allows the discovery of solutions that contribute to the actual social development of the child and overcomes the negative trends regarding the relationship between child and society.

A particular case of this problem is the question: *How does the Roma child fit into the contemporary social situation (in a national context) and what are the essential factors contributing to its current social development? The markers in this case also determine the purpose of the project – identifying the role of the educational environment in support of the process of social development of the Roma child.*

What requires our attention to be directed exactly towards the Roma child and the level of its social development? Few are the main accents:

- The social environment and way of life of a great part of Roma children (Bulgarian conditions) encapsulates them in the Roma community without the possibility of interactions in another wider social context.
- The specific social and cultural identity of the Roma community representatives and the living philosophy about their concepts for home and family; for education, which is not amongst their priority values; for the world of the child and that of adults who do not differ significantly; about the dreams of the Roma child; for the lack of innovative games and toys, etc. As a result, the so-called "modified childhood" is formed, which affects the level of social development and behavior of the child.
- The increasing unemployment in the Roma family, the non-speaking of the official language, the illiteracy in the community where the children live, the adoption of their own rules of living for the purpose of surviving, the existence of negative models of behavior of some of the subjects from the "closed" Roma community in which the child's personal and social development is not at a high level in the scale of values.
- The inclusion of children of Roma ethnicity in the so-called risk groups of children – they are "a particularly vulnerable group of children who need adequate help, support and care" (Krsteva, 2018). According to the author, there are number of measures, above all from the aspect of legal science, aimed at preventing the inclusion of Roma children in the "children at risk" group.
- The upbringing of Roma children in certain cases is carried out by members of the family due to absence of the parents – working abroad, which leads to the occurrence (in Bulgarian conditions) to the complicated social phenomenon – para-parental care (Kovachka, 2017) – an integral concept that "reflects the specifics of problems in upbringing and educating children with parent(s) – migrant workers".
- Neglectful attitude of the Roma community and hence of the child to educational and school reality, which deprives them of new types of experiences, new practical knowledge, new social practices and behavior patterns.
- Identification of the negative attitude of children in the classroom towards the different ones (children of different ethnicity, children with social or special needs)

and lack of fair assessment of their opportunities – a prerequisite for reduced self-confidence and aggressive protection.

- Difficulties of the Roma child when learning the educational content due to the low level of development of the cognitive processes and in this sense also lack of equal start, as well as equal chance for participation in the educational process, etc.

Within this background, the overall picture of the Roma child's childhood offers a series of situations, emotions and experiences, of adult problems and solutions, of "struggle" for status and social experimentation, of discoveries and steps for orientation in the complex social phenomena and relationships. A kind of social lifestyle of the Roma child, often with bad family environment on which the establishment of "self" depends, the dynamics of its individual development, personal and social perspectives, encounters with the world of known and unknown children and adults, of good and bad heroes, of the rights and duties of all people, of the relationships between them. Namely in the context of this summarized picture of childhood in the Roma community, the social development of the Roma child is directed as a dynamic and problematic, often with increased critical attitude and risk in terms of social behavior and adaptation to the surrounding world.

The concept of social development of the child in the age of childhood brings multilayer references. For Feldstein (1989), the main meaning of the child's social development lies in the appropriation of the social essence of man – from "self-perception, reflection, self-esteem and self-affirmation to self-consciousness, social responsibility, interiorization of social motives, need to realize one's own opportunities, subjective self-awareness as a member of society, to understand its place and purpose in it... The assumption of the social identity is a continuous process and at the same time a result of the child's social development in ontogeny". It is obvious that the question is about a complex process of balancing the child with the social system and developing its own individuality and socialness as a consequence of the influence of the social environment and its factors.

In its essence the child's social development is discussed as a goal, a process and a result. It is the required and socially significant component of the general child development, education and socialization. By itself, the level of social development of the child is recognized through the variety of its states, actions, qualities: social sense and social perceptions; social feelings, experiences and emotions; social behavior; Social status; social adaptability; key social competences; initiative; performance; organization; autonomy, etc. (according to Koleva, 2013). Each one of them is permanently being enriched on the one hand with the family conditions, and on the other – with the educational environment, in the scheme of the class community and the interactions with the coevals.

The family, the way of life in the community, the adults' attitude towards the Roma child, their priority activities, etc. are a significant factor for the social development of the Roma child. The picture in regards of the Roma family community is quite different - from the specifics of the traditional multi-child Roma family (including family members of different generations), through problematic anomie families (divorced, poor, unemployed, etc.), to families with successes in life (education, work, preserved values, etc.) (Nunev, 1998). The messages in this case explicitly contribute for the modeling of the vision and the conditions for social development of the Roma child.

2. The educational environment as a social project

The necessity of social development of the Roma child, adequate to the social circumstances and age characteristics, produced the requirement for updating the contents' and organizational resources of the so-called "school educational environment". It is part of the core of the entire pedagogical system and in it, and through it, the deep essence is being formed i.e. the

pedagogical interaction at level educator-child, educator-children, child-children. For the Roma child, the three forms of interaction are significant because they provide them with respect for their individuality and, on the other hand, enrich their social status and the opportunity to be included in the group of peers.

The modern vision of the school educational system has clearly defined parameters, above all due to their didactic and normative type. Priorities, principles and approaches, technologies, expected results typical for the education system are encoded in it. For the Roma child, however, some of them are the “other world” in which rules and norms of behavior act, other than the models and prescriptions they know. The Roma child’s difficult orientation in the school environment is a prerequisite for a negative attitude towards it, lack of interest and motivation to participate in its activities, etc., which is essentially an indication of problems in the process of social development of the child. The consideration of this situation suggests construction of the educational space in a way that allows the Roma child to realize and accept its position as an important participant in it, to identify itself in the group of other people, to accept the educational and school way of life as needed and significant for it.

The orientation of the educational system towards support of the process of social development of the Roma child implies detailed development of its structure and clarification of the contents and meaning of each of its main components. In general it may be determined that they are composed in three stages (Koleva, 2013): **first stage** – *design of spatial (physical and subject) environment*; **second stage** – *an educational process – organized and regulated in class communities based on the age specifics of the children*; **third stage** – *processes of social interactions between the subjects involved in the educational environment – children and educators*. In fact, the components are conditionally differentiated – in essence, they are interrelated and it is important for them to be permanently improved in unity.

First stage – “*design*” of the educational environment, i.e. in the organization and contents of the spatial (physical and subject) environment or the vital space of the Roma child in the classroom should be considered, as far as possible, the specifics of its development, its interests and motivation for participation in the various activities. In this sense, actual are the ideas of Plackrose (1992): “children do need many and different conveniences. They need space where they may do their “dirty” job as painting and modeling, a place where they may quietly work with paper, pencil and a book, of a separate place where they could discuss with their teacher individual matters, of a place where they can make some noise (for music and dramatization) and of a place where an absolute silence is needed (for recording)”. And more, according to Dinchiyska (2005) – “the contemporary understanding of a spatial environment is that it is not an elementary physical category; it is not just a living environment in which the children reside during a certain period of time. It is a cultural and pedagogical complex in which children and their teachers live and work.” The spatial environment should be considered as a “pedagogical composition” with an opportunity to stimulate the activity of the children and with the messages suggested by Jones (1995), such as: “It’s good to be here”, “Here is your place”, “A place you can trust”, “It’s the right place to try and explore your ideas”, “You can be secluded whenever you want”, and so on.

In fact, the overall positive thesis related to the spatial organization of the educational environment in the school aims at overcoming the “closed” spatial solutions and giving priority to the so-called “open” solutions (Plackrose, 1992). The interactions between children and, in this sense, the change in their social position in the classroom is an opportunity for “facilitated communication”, which is the basic, universal feature of any educational environment. And another thing in this sense: “And the walls themselves. Are they used to show children’s works? Are they arranged attractively? Does what they show encourage us to enter the room, to look around, to learn? Does the information displayed on them (drawings, photos ... panels) prompt us to find out more about the subject” (Plackrose, 1992). This emotional picture of the classroom is especially suitable for the Roma child; it is in the context of its spontaneous emotionality and, at

the same time, an opportunity for easy control of social experience. It provides a variety of contacts with children, acquiring skills for coordination of their social and cognitive experience with that of other children; common experiences and solutions occur.

Second stage – *educational process – organized and regulated in class communities based on the children’s age specifics and on their cognitive and social development.* In general, this process is legitimized through educational documentation, including the cognitive content, goals, tasks and activities, pedagogical teaching and learning approaches. By content, all of them are oriented towards developing the child’s cognitive potential and towards its permanent enrichment by including in the process of learning verbal and practical expression and achievement of expected results i.e. the educational minimum and development of the child's intellect. Here especially significant in terms of this work are the questions: *May the educational process be seen as a social project that takes into account the social and cultural priorities of the Roma child? Are the cognitive contents and cognitive actions – literacy, mastery of elementary mathematical actions, narrative and meaningful understanding of the texts sufficiently accessible for understanding by the Roma child?* Because, as written by Dzhorova (2003), “the attitude of the Roma child towards school depends on the degree of success in the fulfilment of the school duties and their adequate assessment. The bigger the success is and the more assessed it is, the more positive and responsible the attitude towards school activities is.” It is a fact that exactly the social outline of the educational process, the one that supports and stimulates the positive feeling of success or “victory over complex tasks” is the reality that the Roma child needs. The social messages of the educational process are of great importance for it – it participates, shows interest, seeks for support, enjoys the success of others, etc. Obstacles related to learning are overcome, the positioning of the Roma child in the classroom is balanced.

The careful planning of the educational process and its individualization from the aspect of the opportunities of the Roma child place practices with significant influence on the process of its social development. Social competences and problem-solving skills are mastered; acts of initiative, independence, diligence, undertaking more responsibility for their own learning are registered. A developing effect has an educational process in which the Roma child is a main personage participating in the situation of “learning”, i.e. it is presented by the teacher as initiator of activities in the educational environment which in its turn reflects on his/her needs, interests and motivation for learning.

The socio-cultural orientation of the educational content, the interpretation of texts related to the life and the social environment, meaningful and familiar to her/him, the discussion of problems with references to the Roma community is essential for the social development of the Roma child. The didactic principles “from familiar to unfamiliar, from close to distant” in this case are essential for the inclusion of the Roma child in the learning process, for the understanding of the lessons taught, for the development of cognitive interests, for mastering observation, analysis and summary skills. Thus, on the basis of an ensured opportunity for work at its own level and a manifestation of mastered cognitive experience, the Roma child starts his “path” to knowledge and to the awareness of his social significance.

The motivation and active participation of the Roma child in the educational process are definitely depending on the presence of “rich” educational environment. Textbooks, teaching notebooks, didactic materials, materials for various individual and group activities, various information products, positive design of the classroom etc. – these are just some of the components of the educational environment necessary for the inclusion of the Roma child. It is the “rich” educational environment with its variety of supplementary means that can provide the Roma children with the opportunity to master basic cognitive actions and operations – analysis and synthesis, comparison, analogy, research, search for solution options, team participations, control of decisions, understanding the meaning of assignments, etc. Within the meaning of these processes it is important “hard” mechanisms or algorithms to be adopted for solving the diversity

of school tasks and situations. The use of well-known schemes for understanding and performance of cognitive actions and operations in the course of the cognitive process, shortens the process of “searching and finding” solutions, which, for the Roma child is an opportunity for almost smooth achievement of the expected result.

In the classroom deliberately created social situations can be offered, adequate solutions to be sought, and the Roma child to be stimulated to discover and realize the possible and desirable social perspectives in front of him/her. Opportunities for positive results offer techniques such as: evidential technologies, social experimenting, role-playing, learning, focused on solutions, team activities and so on. The Roma child’s orientation and research activity stimulated through such techniques allows occurrence of targeting, testing a certain type of behavior, mastering new effective forms and ways of communicating with adults and peers.

Third stage – process of social interactions between those included in the educational environment – children and educators. Namely the latter shape the “image of the educational environment” and help it to be presented as a social project and to be operationalized as a humanistic, developing, harmonious, and interactive. *What is the informal position of the Roma child amongst its peers in the classroom, considering that it is mostly with a lower social status and does not have a high level of sociality compared to other children in the classroom?*

In its essence, the question first focuses on the specifics of the class community or child society in which the Roma child should be involved. The children in the classroom form the vision of the kids’ society that functions on the grounds of clear algorithms for communication and adopted by them rules, regulations, rights, and obligations. Namely the position, the models of behavior, the particular kids’ qualities and their diversity in the context of the common climate of interactions are in the base of the development of sociality and the social development of any child. Their level allows any child to fit into the socio-cultural context of the class without any problems. In this sense the significance of social development of the Roma child – the level and variety of mastered by its social skills and methods for interaction with others is an essential inclusion factor. Any subsequent step towards enrichment of the class community’s sociality reflects over the relations between children – they change towards tolerance, goodwill, mutual assistance, agreement, and joint action to achieve results. And this allows the Roma child to successfully participate in various activities and from different positions – performer, initiator, partner, assistant, self-solving tasks, evaluating and self-assessing, etc. The consequences are also related to the opportunities for socio-cultural identification of the Roma child.

The main subject regulating the interactions in the classroom is the educator. It is quite obvious that he may model and improve all components of the educational environment. The teacher’s professional competences (European qualification framework for lifelong learning, 2005) suggest specialized psychological and pedagogic knowledge about the child, successful management of the pedagogic resources, personal qualities and values. These are the prerequisite for the creation of a “social project” for the Roma child that will permanently update the process of its social development with reflection on the inclusion, the sense of community, the understanding of the positive messages of the school environment and the prospect of inclusion. In essence, the social project requires the teacher to “step-by-step” to “recognize” the Roma child, to create conditions meeting his or her potential and needs, to “provide” a formal and informal learning environment for active and positive behavior. The question is about steps that require the teacher to prepare, plan, organize, and carry out a series of actions using diverse and individualized methods, tools and techniques in the course of pedagogical interaction.

It is imperative that the steps of the teacher are aimed at getting to know the strengths and weaknesses and specifics of the Roma child, the positives and negatives of the environment in which he/she lives, the specificity of ethnical and cultural identification, desires, interests and claims, attitude to the school environment. This will enable him to shape the “real” vision for the

Roma child and define the parameters of his positive strategy for working with him, the realization of which will allow for acceptable social and learning outcomes. Creating a positive emotional environment and a climate of trust (by M. Montessori) on the basis of informal social interactions between the teacher and the Roma child in general leads to a change of its attitude towards the environment and provides criteria for assessing what is true and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad, what is beautiful and what is ugly, etc. And this of course reflects on the possibility of overcoming the “school disadaptation” (according to Shosheva, 2008). In a detailed plan, it is important for the teacher to work for Roma children to understand the messages of the school environment and the class community – why we need to be in school, pleasant and unpleasant activities, we accept and respect the differences, here it is safe and peaceful, learning is a pleasant activity, assistance, cooperation and friendships are very important, participation in class activities has a perspective sense of self development and future realization, etc.

Significant for the social development of the Roma child are also extra-curricular activities and informal relations in the educational environment. It is true that today’s Bulgarian school almost does not position its commitments and influence on the daily life of the Roma child outside the classroom and does not offer a variety of programs for unintentional interactions of professional educators with it. However, also true is the trend, according to which the social expectations and mission, objectives and tasks of the Bulgarian school are changing permanently and at the same time dynamically. The specificity of the educational situation in the Roma community adds further details to the emerging trend. In this context, the pedagogical community should also be focused on initiating a variety of extracurricular activities and informal communication with the Roma child. The participation of children in projects outside the classroom – sports activities, entertainment programs, activities chosen by them, creative activities, work activities, historical or geographic tours, volunteer squads, “desegregation projects” – all of these are part of the prerequisites for achieving positive informal relationships between peers of different ethnic backgrounds, teachers and parents.

3. Conclusions

Researchers of the “childhood” phenomenon take into account the impact of “social changes” on the reality of “childhood” as well as on the social practices of each child. Discussed as “complex social formation and structural element of the society” (according to Shteglova, 2003), it is important to be taken into consideration “the different faces of the contemporary interpretation of childhood” (according to Chavdarova-Kostova, 2018). More priority have the accents which direct us to the fact that the childhood nowadays should be “discusses as a period in which the society, in broad terms, and the family in a narrower context, implements a process of investment in child in view of its future social, incl. economic prosperity” (Chavdarova-Kostova, 2018). It is about investment in human capital, even though, as Krastev (2018) writes “the investments made for increasing human capital not always result in increasing his potential, because this depends, first of all, on providing suitable environment for its realization”. And what is the educational environment that is provided to Roma children and are the investments made in it the key to solving the issues related to their social development and active inclusion in the educational system?

Unfortunately, our national educational legislation still does not prioritize the educational environment, does not recognize it as a social project with serious functions in terms of children’s development, notwithstanding their ethnicity, religion, gender, social status, the investments are still insufficient, etc. And most importantly, the provocations and requirements typical for the new socio-cultural and educational situation in the modern 21st century with respect to the life and development of the child are not taken into account.

On its part, the educational environment should work to overcome stereotypes and prejudices, as well as to sustain the understanding that “education is one of the main means at its disposal to solve, though difficult, the problems. The argument “education” suggests serious educational resources which generally envisages not only political solutions, but also legal, economic, social and cultural ones” (Krastev & Krasteva, 2016).

The above listed trends, which are directly related to the process of globalization, seem to be far from the Roma community's ideas about the development of their own children. In the spirit of humanistic attitude towards children, as well as their social development, this community “must properly “read” the messages of time and find the right path” to support the development, education and socialization of its adolescent representatives.

Undoubtedly, the childhood of a Roma child is an almost unmanageable “grey-and-white” social situation for which pedagogical science does not yet have reliable tools for interaction and, above all, for stimulating its social development.

The reliable positions in this direction are identified as:

- Design and operationalization of a national educational project based on the understanding that the educational environment at school should also be seen as a social project with commitments to the social and personal development of each child.
- Inclusion of Roma child in the educational environment and providing opportunities for communication with peers seen as a chance for its current social development and change of social status in the children's community;
 - Active learning of the official Bulgarian language by the Roma child and his / her family for a successful social orientation in social paradigms and inclusion in the process of school education;
 - Specialized intercultural teacher training for work with the Roma child – acquainting with the values, traditions, language and religion of the Roma community, mastering skills for performing mediatory functions in order to overcome social distances and ethnic stereotypes, acquainting with the specifics of ethnic identification, and so on;
 - Professional psychological and pedagogical teacher training oriented towards finding the specific individuality and sociality of Roma child and provision of conditions for their harmonization by means of the educational environment's components;
 - Systematic and contemporary enrichment of the school educational environment in both directions – as a prerequisite for the development of the Roma child's social potential and as a significant condition for the change of the social context of the class community. It is the social context, encoded in the sense of the educational activities that will assist the Roma child in the course of the most useful adaptation and integration in the public space.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

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