

ROMA TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: SUPPORT TEACHING STAFF OR MAIDS AND NANNIES?

Abstract. One of the many measures used to improve the integration of Roma into national education systems is regarded as particularly successful: Roma teaching assistants. Although Roma teaching assistants are internationally promoted and recommended, some Roma representatives remain cautious about their use as their effectiveness may be questioned and their subordination to teachers may ultimately keep marginalised pupils in subservient positions. Based on empirical research, this article finds the mechanism of Roma teaching assistants in Slovenia is well implemented, yet such assistants are in a subordinate position to teachers and along with Roma pupils often physically separated from the rest of the class. However, they maintain a very friendly relationship with both teachers and pupils and principally act as a cultural and linguistic bridge.

Keywords: dependency trap, integration, Roma pupils, Roma teaching assistants, egregation

Introduction

The desegregation of Romani education and prevention of any further segregation must be the backbone of governmental education policies striving for equality of opportunity. Without education being integrated, education policies concerning the Roma have little chance of succeeding, as demonstrated in the last few decades. Desegregation policies should be comprehensive by including measures aimed at all relevant actors affected by the education process. Yet national education systems provide some obstacles for Romani pupils. According to Kirilova and Repaire (2003), these include the placement of Romani pupils in special needs schools and the widespread segregation of Romani pupils, coupled with external factors like poverty, isolation of the Romani community, cultural and linguistic barriers, low levels of support from Romani parents, and lower education standards.

* Irena Bačlija-Brajnik, PhD, Associate Professor, Faculty for Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; Vladimir Prebilič, PhD, Associate Professor, Faculty for Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Numerous affirmative-action mechanisms exist for improving Roma pupils' integration into the national system. Farkas (2007) categorises them as: programmes addressing minority-language speakers, teachers assisting in maintaining contact with the community and families, return programmes from special to mainstream education, curriculum and/or teacher training on Roma language and culture, inclusion of Roma community members in educational provision, pre-school provision, extra teacher for Roma, reaching out to early school leavers, cohabitation programmes etc. One of the most commonly used mechanisms is to introduce Roma teaching assistants (RTAs) into classrooms to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers (Rus, 2006). Studies conducted in some CEE countries (Guy and Kovats, 2006) show that Roma teaching assistants have positively impacted: (1) attendance levels; (2) the number of drop-outs; and (3) the average grades of Romani pupils. Although internationally recognised and often recommended (EU; Council of Europe), some research findings (Tankersly, Konkova and Repiski, 2002; Rona and Lee, 2001) imply this mechanism comes with serious limitations that could even promote the further marginalisation of Roma pupils. These research reports established that in many classrooms, RTAs are in fact seen serving snacks to pupils, cleaning up after teachers, or pupils or watching over pupils in the playground while the teacher takes a break. Instead of being seen as a role model for pupils, teaching assistants are placed in the "position of babysitters or maids" (*ibid.*).

The Roma minority in Slovenia is relatively small (only 0.5% of the total population) compared to other Central and Eastern European countries (in Hungary it is estimated at 4.5% of the total population, in Slovakia at 4.8%), yet it is protected by the Constitution with certain affirmative-action policies being applied to empower members of the Romani minority. Educational policies have also appeared in response to the evident need given that the 2002 census shows the vast majority of Roma (over 70%) never finished primary school and just 3% finished secondary school. The reasons for this situation are poorly researched. One possible indicator found in a 1991 study (Tancer, 1999) concluded the problem was the poor quality of home environments (pupils had little support from their parents when doing homework; pupils did not have the necessary means to study - a desk, a quiet room, supplies etc.). In 2004, the Slovenian government prepared the Strategy for Educating Roma Minority, providing mechanisms like: (1) enrolment of Roma children in pre-school education; (2) Roma teaching assistants; (3) adaptation of the curriculum (with an emphasis on language learning and auxiliary classes in Roma culture etc.); (4) additional education for teachers; (5) financial aid for schools with Roma pupils; and (6) the abolition of all forms of segregation.

This contribution aims to offer insights into Roma teaching assistants,

especially their competencies and involvement in the school system, arguing that RTAs are not simply professionally subordinate to teachers but their subordination is perceived as existing beyond their assistant teacher function. Conclusions are drawn from empirical research on Roma teaching assistants in Slovenia, relying on interviews with Roma teaching assistants and their fellow workers/teachers. Although the research was conducted back in 2012, the results have never been published before and remain highly relevant to the topic under study. Only two other contributions have so far addressed this issue (Tankersly, Konkova and Repiski, 2002; Rona and Lee, 2001), but they lacked empirical evidence. This paper accordingly provides rare and valuable insight into the topic and, even though the research data are a few years old, no major changes have occurred in the RTA environment, allowing us to hypothesise that empirical research conducted today would yield similar results.

This paper has two aims. First, an overview of the RTA as a professional institution (which explains the systematic framework allowing for professional subordination). Second, through a case study of Slovenia it will consider the question of whether RTAs are perceived as also being subordinate beyond the professional teacher vs. teaching assistant role division.

Council of Europe and European Union Policy Framework that Promotes Roma Teaching Assistants

In Europe, education policy is chiefly a competency of national (or federal) governments. Yet, like with most other aspects of public policy, international conventions and instruments, intergovernmental organisations like the European Union (EU) help shape the larger framework to which states adhere. Although education is not an area of direct EU powers, it is a rapidly changing arena in which the EU provides a forum for the exchange of ideas. Education was formally recognised as an area of EU competency in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. Under Article 126 (1):

the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.

The EU has adopted two important anti-discrimination Directives, Directive 2000/43/EC (“the Race Directive”) of 29 June 2000, which implements the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective

of racial or ethnic origin, and Directive 2000/78/EC (“the Employment Directive”) of 17 November 2000, which establishes a framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation, requiring member states to create an impartial body to hear complaints of discrimination.

To evaluate the effectiveness of Roma-specific policies and projects, and to acquire more data on Roma, the European Commission’s Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs: Anti-Discrimination, Fundamental Social Rights and Civil Society Unit commissioned a 2005 study entitled “The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged EU: Fundamental Rights and Anti-Discrimination”. This examination critically analysed existing EU policies and concluded that currently little analysis of those policies is available, nor sufficient data collected regarding them, to accurately assess how the education policies impact ethnic minority groups, specifically Roma. This not only continues the segregation of education, it also threatens realisation of goals derived from the Lisbon Agenda (Open Society Institute, 2007).

On the other hand, the Council of Europe has more profoundly addressed specific mechanisms. In Recommendation No R(2000)4 adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 2000, the idea of “using mediators from the Roma/Gypsy community” is mentioned twice in the context of the communication between schools and parents and in order “to ease the contacts between Roma/Gypsy, the majority population and schools and to avoid conflicts at school”.¹ The use of individuals from the Roma community to act as teaching assistants or mediators and to help Roma children obtain high-quality schooling based on school/community dialogue and partnership is widely promoted by the Council of Europe because it is producing good results and should (according to Rus, 2004) be supported and generalised within all European school systems. The Council of Europe promotes some type of mediation (via either Roma teaching assistants or Roma mediators) through projects like “Romani language education”, ROMED1 and ROMED2 (Kyuchukov, 2012) and concept papers like “Guide for Roma school mediators/assistants” (Rus and Zatreanu, 2009).

Comparative Overview of the Institution Roma Teaching Assistant

In most countries, for example in Spain, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Finland, France and Romania, the employment of Roma mediators/assistants started already in the 1980s and 1990s (Rus, 2006). The description of the institution of RTA varies from country to country, although some basic parallels can be drawn. Their main tasks relating to Roma class members

¹ Member states are also encouraged to adopt this type of mechanism in Recommendation 1203 on Gypsies in Europe by the Council of Europe, which promotes the role of Roma mediators.

include helping pupils master the official language of the country, facilitating the process of communication between the teacher and pupils, encouraging a positive attitude to the education process and facilitating pupils' full integration into the school environment. The RTA also actively participates in the education process and extracurricular activities. However, the RTA's role is not only related to their work at school; countries also highlight the importance of working outside of the classroom. The description of their tasks includes, among other things, establishing relations with the Roma community and the families of Roma children who often avoid direct contact with schools and communicating with teachers (Rus, 2006).

The requirements for accepting the position of RTA are either an elementary education or having completed high school. In Croatia, where the 'profession' is not certified, a high school diploma is required for an RTA position and a candidate must be of Romani origin and speak Romani. In Slovakia, the RTA completes a course with² a training institution accredited by the Ministry of Education. The course is lengthy and consists of 150 lessons. On the other hand, the training of RTAs in Poland is provided by a local educational non-governmental organisation (the Educational Society of Malopolska) and only consists of a nine-day training programme. In the Czech Republic, a candidate is required to know issues concerning the Roma and to have completed a training course provided by institutions under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. In Hungary, an RTA candidate must also be familiar with the situation in the Roma community, have completed at least primary education and a 60-hour training course (Open Society Institute, 2012).

Regarding the certification associated with training programmes, two kinds of training are provided to RTAs: professional training and initial training within a pedagogical institution. In Slovakia, for example, the initial training programme for RTAs is called the Pedagogical Minimum (Rus, 2006). The lectures focus on the assistants' role in the school, pedagogy, psychology, social work, human rights, conflict resolution, communication techniques and leisure activities (Guy and Kovats, 2006). Since the training provided for RTAs is mostly based on seminars, it would be better (in terms of results and later employment prospects) to provide longer training in recognised educational institutions, e.g. teacher training colleges or universities. However, the cost of this training is fairly high – particularly for

² *The training programmes for the RTA 'profession' in different countries have similar content; they consist of a theoretical and practical part, and the modules or subjects include understanding the role of an RTA, pedagogy, the Roma culture, psychology, communication techniques, knowledge of the school system, and other skills needed to work in the educational process. The length of the RTA training programmes also varies; in some countries, the programmes last for days, elsewhere only hours, while in other countries the training occurs in modules.*

people from underprivileged communities – and it is as yet unclear how it will be covered. With very few exceptions, most countries do not have systematic training for RTAs in place (Council of Europe, 2006).

The RTA is registered as a professional role in some countries (e.g. Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia). Certain countries (Hungary) are in the process of instituting accreditation for RTAs, while other countries (Croatia) do not recognise this as a profession. Croatia's non-recognition of the RTA profession is because it does not have a special formal training system, namely, a key requirement for obtaining the RTA qualification in the majority of other countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia) (Open Society Institute, 2012).

Roma Teaching Assistants in Classrooms

Many countries have adopted the role of RTA; currently, about 500 RTAs are employed in Bulgaria, 250 in Slovakia and 100 in Poland. In contrast, only 18 RTAs are employed in Croatia and 26 in Slovenia. In countries where after the pilot stages of internationally-funded projects³ it was decided to further maintain the institution of RTA, a gradual rise in the number of RTAs has been seen. In Bulgaria, between 2001 and 2004 the number of RTAs rose from 50 to 500; in the Czech Republic from 30 in 1995 to 320 in 2004 (Open Society Institute, 2012).

Still, research is lacking on how RTAs are integrated into the working environment and, consequently, what the strategy is or should be for further developing this evolving profession. Bačlija and Grabner (2014) presented a longitudinal study of how RTAs perceived their career in Slovenia that might shed light on the issue and help understand how the position and profession of RTA could be optimised in the future. In their study, they established that while, on average, RTAs are young individuals, their age increases consistently with the duration of their employment. This indicates RTAs are likely to stay in the profession; the majority even continue to work at the same school. Most RTAs have completed secondary school, finished vocational training for their profession, speak Romani and are Romani in origin. The majority of RTAs would also like to retain their position in the future, allowing the conclusion that a stable core (group) of RTAs is forming.

³ Many countries launched the pilot projects, ran the initial training courses and employed the first RTAs. These pilot projects were mostly financed by PHARE or the European Social Fund (ESF). In Bulgaria, the pilot project "Promoting the Integration of Roma" was conducted in 1998 when 50 RTAs were employed; whereas in Croatia, 2 years later, only three RTAs were employed as one of the measures to increase the integration of Roma. In Hungary, the first RTAs were employed in 2001; the first RTAs in Romania were employed in 2002 and the first appeared in Poland in 2003.

Since RTAs are teaching *assistants*, they are not equal partners to teachers in the educational process. However, their subordination goes well beyond the professional cleavage (Rus, 2006). Research findings in Slovenia (Bačlija and Grabner, 2014) show that RTAs miss opportunities for additional training, access to an office and/or computer to prepare for lessons and stimulation (financial and non-financial). Due to the inequality of RTAs and the teaching staff, in some countries (e.g. Bulgaria (Save the Children Foundation, 2001), Slovakia (Tankersly, Konkova and Repiski, 2002)), Roma representatives were clearly opposed to utilising RTAs in schools, claiming it would lead to the segregation of Roma children and reinforce their inferior status with regard to the majority of children. For instance, in the case of Slovakia, as reported by Tankersly, Konkova and Repiski (2002), in many classrooms RTAs are in fact seen serving students snacks, cleaning up after teachers or students, or watching the students in the playground while the teacher takes a break. Some findings in Bulgaria (Save the Children Foundation, 2001) even reveal that a programme to train RTAs appeared to reinforce lower standards for Roma pupils.

Dynamic in the Classroom: Empirical Evidence

To help answer whether the professional subordination of RTAs to teachers brings any negative spillover effects, we conducted a nation-wide study by interviewing 26 Slovenian RTAs and 26 teachers who work with RTAs between November 2012 and March 2013. The research formed part of the project “Successful Inclusion of Roma in Education and Upbringing II” conducted by the Faculty for Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana (as a consortium partner) and funded by the European Social Fund. The aim of the research was to gather interviews from as many RTAs in Slovenia as possible (and their teacher co-workers). The absolute number of RTAs was not established. Since no quota exists for Roma pupils in the classroom to automatically ensure a school receives funding to employ an RTA and since the legislation prohibits data collection based on ethnicity, the exact number of RTAs who work in Slovenia is unknown. Some are employed as “teachers for auxiliary help”, some as RTA, others as Roma mediators, and are most commonly funded from different sources (European Social Funds, national projects, school funds etc.) (Vonta, 2006, 2007; Bačlija, 2008). Interviews were thus conducted with all RTAs listed at the time as an RTA at the Ministry of Education. It was estimated the research covered about 85% of all RTAs in Slovenia, with 26 of the RTAs interviewed working in 29 primary schools (some work part-time at two schools). Ideally, Roma parents and Roma pupils would also be interviewed, although there are limits (including legislative) that prevent such data gathering.

The following sections are organised to first establish the relationship between RTAs and teachers, second to determine how both surveyed groups perceive their relationship with one another and the relationship of their co-workers (in the case of teachers that means RTAs, and vice-versa) to Roma pupils and, third, to establish the relationship the two groups have to Roma parents. The interviews were designed to avoid provoking possible conflicts and the questions were therefore structured more comparatively (e.g. instead of asking “Who do you think Roma parents trust more, the RTA or the teacher?”, participants were asked “How would you assess your relationship to Roma parents in comparison to their relationship to the teacher?”), thereby promoting an indirect reply. Both surveyed groups were asked the same or very similar questions; thus, a comparison of their responses helps clarify the relationships in practice.

RTAs and Teachers: Good Cooperation with Elements of Segregation

Although a hierarchical professional relationship between RTAs and teachers is anticipated, there is the question of how they interact as individuals. When RTAs and teachers were asked how they co-operate with each other, both groups answered they have a very good or a good relationship. Some RTAs and teachers are also friendly in their private lives. As one teacher explained: “We help each other, plan work together and are also friends in private life. We really do have a great friendly relationship, as our RTA is simply a wonderful person”.

Many other teachers expressed similar sympathy for the personalities of RTAs. However, there is a slight difference in opinion when the teachers describe how satisfied they are with the RTA's performance. One teacher replied: “I don't think our RTA has the right approach to the pupils, although she does try”. Another added: “They help physically, not professionally. They basically physically oversee these pupils. This is their priority”.

Teachers find RTAs especially helpful in overcoming cultural barriers. One teacher gave an illustrative example: “I was teaching a young girl who was always barefoot. She would always take her slippers off and run around barefoot and I would run after her with her slippers asking her to put them on. This went on and on. Eventually, the RTA approached me and kindly explained ‘We [Roma] like to go barefoot. I am always barefoot. I hate it that I have to have shoes on at work. She'll be fine barefoot’. And so, I just let this little girl be”.

Another important aspect of RTA-teacher cooperation is how each is involved in the educational process. As the role of RTAs is different to teachers, who are the main educator (compared to the RTA who is seen as an auxiliary helper), it is to be expected that the teacher plays a central role.

Yet it was not expected that, in most cases, RTAs do not assist in the regular educational process, even as an auxiliary helper. Instead, RTAs are assigned to spend time with Roma pupils in a separate room. One RTA explained: "Sometimes, when the teacher decides that it would be better for me to work with Roma pupils individually, I take them away". Another added: "I am in the classroom about 30 per cent of the time. Other time is spent working with Roma pupils individually. I don't think that we are segregating Roma pupils. It is just that it works better that way; we are all more successful".

In response to the question of how much time, on average, a teacher spends together with an RTA in the classroom, one teacher stated: "Oh not at all. Not together with him. I give him instructions on what to do with kids. Then he works with Roma pupils individually".

Pupils' Perceptions: RTAs are Friends, Teachers are Teachers

Since it was impossible to obtain information on how Roma pupils perceive RTAs and teachers from the Roma pupils themselves, we asked both of the study's subject groups about this relationship. While teachers observe their relationship with Roma pupils as being a 'normal' teacher-pupil relationship, RTAs mostly perceive their relationship to Roma pupils as being friendly and see themselves as a mentor. Some teachers admitted having friendlier relationships with Roma pupils than they do with non-Roma pupils, generally because the Roma pupils are underprivileged. One teacher explained: "Some Roma pupils need more comfort, a hug, a talk. So, we are friendlier".

When both groups were asked how they perceive their relationship to Roma pupils in comparison to their co-workers (RTAs and teachers, respectively), most teachers replied the relationship is the same, while most RTAs believed the Roma pupils are being held back while interacting with teachers. One RTA responded:

Pupils are more held back when they interact with teachers. They trust me more. For example, when a Roma pupil wants to say something to the teacher ... well, he just won't say anything. He will tell me in Romani and then, with the pupil's permission, I will tell this to the teacher. But only with the pupil's permission. So that I win their trust.

Another RTA added: "Our relationship is not a teacher-pupil relationship. Well, they see me as an adult figure, but not a formal figure, not the teacher. I don't know ... they trust us more. We are more like mentors".

The question is whether a more informal and friendly relationship, while possibly fostering a subordinate position for the RTA, is in the best interest

of Roma pupils. One RTA added: "Roma pupils are not as obedient while interacting with me. They know that we are equals and that I will not punish them as teachers would. I am not scolding them; I am motivating them. Sometimes, I tell them that I'll leave the classroom unless they behave. That usually does the trick".

The way in which the RTAs' presence influences the overall classroom climate is another important factor. The question addressing this issue was posed only to teachers. The majority of teachers believe the RTA's presence has a good influence on all pupils (Roma and non-Roma) as they help overcome the linguistic and cultural differences; moreover, the RTA's presence gives teachers more time to pay attention to all of their pupils. One teacher answered: "The experience is very positive. Pupils perceive the RTA and myself equally. The kids love her as she takes care of Roma and non-Roma [pupils] if they need help". Another teacher offered a somewhat different view: "Non-Roma pupils were being held back at first, but now they have accepted the RTA. She doesn't have great authority, but she is welcomed". However, one teacher thought the RTAs' presence is a bad influence because it gives Roma pupils a feeling of being unequal.

Roma Parents: RTAs are Welcomed and Needed

The parents of Roma pupils are more often in contact with the RTAs than they are with teachers. The majority of teachers have rare contact with the parents of their Roma pupils and some (three teachers) have no contact at all. On the other hand, the RTAs have frequent and intense contact with the Roma parents. Some (at times) even call individual Roma parents up to six times per day, depending on the situation. They often visit the Roma community (some live there) and have day-to-day contact with parents. One RTA explained: "We are in contact almost every day. If not in person, then by phone call. I also visit the Roma community; thus, we are always in contact".

When asked how they perceive the frequency of contact with their co-workers (thus how RTAs perceive the frequency of contact between Roma parents and teachers, and vice-versa), both groups offered similar responses. There is greater contact between RTAs and parents; yet, there is also some contact between teachers and Roma parents.

RTAs were further asked how parents perceive the RTA role in the educational process. The majority answered that the parents' perception is that RTAs help Roma pupils in the educational process and that RTAs act as a bridge between parents and the school. One RTA replied: "They see me as a confidant and as a link between them and the school. Parents trust me more than they trust teachers. They come to my consultation hours, for example. And they want to talk in Romani. Thus, the RTA is a necessity".

A significant number of RTAs responded that parents hold them responsible for their child's success at school. "I think they perceive me as teaching help. But I am not there to make their kid successful. I help. But they see me very positively". About four RTAs believe that parents regard them as unnecessary. However, the overall picture is very positive, as noted in one RTA's response: "They see me as someone who helps their children. I have the feeling that parents respect me".

Conclusion

The overview of RTA training reveals the anticipated professional hierarchy vis-à-vis the teaching profession as RTAs do not receive as much pedagogical education and training as teachers. The description of the RTA 'profession' clearly states that they are teaching helpers; thus, they do not have a prime role in the education system. RTAs act as cultural and linguistic bridges (especially in those countries (or communities) where Roma pupils are not bilingual) that enable the educational process to proceed smoothly and normally.

Empirical analyses in Slovenia led us to conclude that, although RTAs have a different role than teachers, who are the primary educator (unlike the RTA who is an auxiliary helper), in most cases the RTAs do not assist in the regular educational process, even as an auxiliary helper, as they should and are trained to do. Instead, RTAs are assigned to spend time with Roma pupils in another room. In many cases, the teaching staff uses RTAs to separate Roma pupils from the remainder of the class so they can be taught in smaller groups by the RTA, thereby further reinforcing segregation. However, in many schools RTAs and teachers have very friendly relationships, which might stimulate the development of friendships between Roma and non-Roma pupils. RTAs also help in situations where pupils are not bilingual, while when the pupils are bilingual RTAs can offer an insight into the Romani culture to help teachers better understand their Roma pupils, thereby reducing classroom tensions. As RTAs in Slovenia have to speak Romani (they are thus Roma or Roma in origin), they mostly come from Roma communities and informally act as mediators between the school and the Roma community. Since they are perceived very positively by both Romani parents and the entire community, they can also serve as a cultural mediator and become pioneers in a future multicultural society.

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