

Promoting equal access to education

Supporting Roma children through a parent–school partnership project

Center for Educational Initiatives (CEI) Step-by-Step Project, Bosnia and Herzegovina

It is 8 pm and a group of 20 parents and their children – a mixture of Roma and non-Roma – are standing in line in front of a small office in the *Branko opii* Elementary School in Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina. They are waiting patiently to return their picture books and get more to read. They have just finished a two-hour workshop, and they are talking to each other and the parent-group facilitators about how they have spent time with their children during the past week and which activities have been successful. In this country, more than 90 percent of children aged 3 to 6 years are not attending pre–school and there are only a handful of Roma children in pre–school. However, this elementary school has initiated a creative response to the need to provide early childhood development opportunities for the young children and families who are normally left out of the system. So, what brought these parents, teachers and children together?

Setting the context: educational opportunities for Roma children in Bosnia

Few Bosnian Roma children complete their basic education. Only 32 percent of Roma children complete primary school, and the drop-out rate increases in higher grades, especially for girls. Less than 10 percent attend secondary education and only a few students are enrolled in university¹. This educational deprivation amongst Roma children is the consequence of three intertwined causes: general racism and segregation in society, low socio-economic status and a minority-insensitive educational system. Pervasive racism at all levels of the school system results in education settings that

are inherently unequal because they do nothing to support the success of Roma children in school. Roma children are more likely to have a lower socio-economic background than their majority peers. Even when preschool facilities are available, most families are not able to pay the fees, even though they are subsidized. The high level of illiteracy amongst parents and the lack of educational materials at home result in educational disadvantages when the children enter school. As a result, unlike their majority peers, most Roma children enter formal education unprepared: they are not fluent in the language of instruction (at home they speak Romani rather than Bosnian), and they lack basic social skills and competencies. Many have never held or played with pencils, crayons, paints or books.

At the same time, biases that exist against the Roma are reflected in the educational system. Some schools still have segregated classrooms for Roma children, while teachers have low expectations of both the children and their parents. Roma parents do not feel welcomed in schools, and this leads to mutual distrust. Educators sometimes view Roma parents as uninterested and therefore make little effort to engage them in their children's education and the school community.

Breaking the cycle by reaching out to Roma parents

In an effort to address this problem, the Center for Educational Initiatives (CEI) Step-by-Step², a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that promotes access to quality, child-centred education for all children in Bosnia and Herzegovina, introduced a

parenting education programme in one school in each of three selected communities. The goals of the initiative were to improve children's readiness for school, promote better school-family relationships and encourage more positive expectations amongst parents and teachers. More specifically, the objectives were:

- to raise awareness of and sensitivity to minority and human rights issues amongst educators and school administrators in three communities with high Roma populations;
- to support parents in creating a stimulating home environment for developing the cognitive and social skills of Roma children aged 3 to 6 years;
- to improve the school-readiness of Roma children through positive interventions in the areas of early learning and literacy.

In the first year, approximately 15 primary school teachers, 60 Roma parents and 40 majority parents were involved in the programme in the three communities.

Two parenting education programmes

The intervention was based on two parenting education programmes: 'Parenting with Confidence and Getting Ready for School'³. The educational materials were developed and piloted in four countries from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) by the Open Society Institute (OSI) in collaboration with the International Step-by-Step Association (ISSA), a regional network established to promote access, equity and quality in early childhood education. Materials and training were provided for early childhood experts in 29 countries participating in the Step-by-Step Programme, an early childhood education initiative implemented since 1994 primarily in CEE and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Bosnian trainers and experts participating in the programme adapted the training workshops and materials to fit their specific context. The materials have also been implemented in related projects in poor communities in Argentina and the United States.

'Parenting with Confidence' is designed to support parents in providing an optimal home environment for their young children. The aim is to help parents to become more aware of what they are already doing well and to provide a learning environment

within which they can examine alternative ideas and learn skills for more positive parent-child interactions in everyday life. More specifically the programme attempts to:

- support parents in their child-rearing efforts;
- offer child development information and alternative parenting techniques;
- foster effective communication between parents and their children;
- enhance parents' skills in providing rich child-learning experiences;
- promote parent-school partnerships.

By educating parents about basic child development concepts, the programme develops parents' confidence and provides them with some comfort in knowing how much they are doing already to give their child the best possible start. Parents learn observation skills that help them become more aware of their children's verbal and non-verbal messages. Facilitators can select from a variety of themes to discuss with parents, including:

- What is child development?
- Understanding brain development
- Play: an adventure in learning
- Early literacy
- Role of fathers
- Understanding temperament
- Setting limits
- Keeping safe
- The transition from home to school

Additional activities were drawn from a second series of materials: 'Getting Ready for School', a home-based curriculum that helps parents equip their children with the skills and enthusiasm for learning they need when they start school. It focuses on developing and reinforcing early literacy and numeracy. There is a guide for facilitators and separate materials for parents and children. Through weekly workshops, leaders disseminate and explore the materials with parents and support them as they help their children get ready for school. The materials are designed to be open-ended and to help parents tailor activities to their children's interests and abilities. For example, parents can teach number concepts using games such as dominos or by counting when cooking, and the children can begin to read by focusing on the first letters of words used around the house.

Guidebooks provide parents with advice on how to make the activities easier or more challenging, depending on the child's level of development.

Developing skills and learning together: workshops for parents

"We've been exchanging experiences with other parents. That is important because all those 'problem' situations are not problems any more. We all have similar concerns."

Participating parent

One of the most challenging tasks for many schools was inviting Roma parents to join together to establish a new programme to support younger children in the community. Each of the three participating schools provided a room for the workshops to take place, and trained two school staff (usually primary school teachers) in early childhood development, parenting and group facilitation techniques. School principals arranged teaching schedules to include the two-hour weekly sessions within the teaching load of the participating teachers. This was a critical step, as it meant that no additional funding was required to support workshop facilitators, and this will support the sustainability of the project.

In each of the participating schools, parent education workshops were held once a week for 10 months. Although most participants were Roma, parents from the majority population whose children did not attend preschool were also invited. This created the opportunity for parents to learn from each other in an accepting and welcoming environment. An initial series of workshops on 'Education for Social Justice', an anti-bias program for adults, were provided to all parents and teachers participating in the programme⁴. These personal development workshops helped all participants to learn to bridge their cultural differences and respect each other.



Photo: Courtesy Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step BiH

Through weekly workshops, leaders disseminate and explore the materials with parents and support them as they help their children get ready for school

"I've changed my attitude toward teacher-parent relationships. I expect much better co-operation with these parents than I've had with the parents of children in my previous classes."

Workshop facilitator (also a teacher)

The co-ordinators predicted that many parents would find it difficult to arrange childcare so they could attend parent workshops. To prevent this becoming a barrier to participation, the children were also invited to participate in every workshop. Workshop leaders prepared activities for the children, focusing on the development of social, cognitive, emotional and motor skills. During each two-hour session, the children spent some time with their parents and some time in a child-centred classroom environment. Likewise, the parents spent some time doing activities with the children and some time in parent workshops. Involving both parents and children had an unexpected consequence: when parents were tempted to skip a workshop, the children insisted they attend.

"After the workshops, the children couldn't stop talking about the activities. They told everyone at home and

even spoke to grandmother and grandfather on the phone.”

Parent

Ongoing communication: parent resource room and lending library

To facilitate and model a stimulating learning environment, the project provided funds for furnishing and equipping a room with learning materials to support cognitive development and language skill acquisition. Educational materials, including reading and picture books, were made available for parents and children to borrow. Each parent also received a set of 10 booklets containing information on basic child development and these supported the workshop activities. Focusing on children from birth through to age 6 years, the booklets contain practical answers to the cognitive, emotional, social and language questions facing parents of young children.

Making a difference

The children who attended preparatory workshops with their parents throughout the 2006–07 school year are now starting first grade. A formal evaluation is in progress. While the outcomes of parenting education programmes are difficult to measure, there is no doubt that this programme has already had positive outcomes. The programme raised awareness of and sensitivity to minority and human rights among educators and school administrators in the three communities and has helped set a group of children on the path to educational success.

“On Monday, 3 September 2007, Elementary School II in Mostar began a new school year,” says Fahira Vejzovi, one of five teachers involved in the project. “For many of the 120 children who entered the first grade classrooms, it was the first time they had been inside the school building. School staff welcomed the children and parents with kindness and support, but still some of the children couldn’t hold back their tears after their parents had left. However, the teachers noticed that none of the 25 children who had attended workshops during the previous year cried or asked for their parents. They were already familiar with the school building, the classroom and the school staff. It was especially touching to see that they were trying to comfort the children who were crying. They were ready to play with others, learn a

song, read their name and the names of others, count the words in a song, and they stayed focused longer than the others. That must be the result of the workshops.”

In order to support the sustainability of project outcomes, CEI Step-by-Step organised a final two-day meeting with all participating schools plus two additional schools from each of the three communities. After presenting the first year results, all nine schools agreed to implement parenting workshops on a regular basis in the future. They plan to establish a formal network of schools and trained facilitators and to help strengthen additional schools by sharing their experience and coaching new facilitators. Five schools from other parts of the country have also expressed a strong interest in starting parenting workshops and have these have been given the necessary materials. Thus, in the second year of the programme, 14 schools are holding parenting workshops using their own resources and several more are making plans to follow suit.

In addition, three Pedagogical Institutes in these communities will integrate parenting workshops in their annual plans for extracurricular activities. This is very important because it provides the legal framework for schools to organise and fund parent workshops. The Pedagogic Institute from one region (Herzegovina-Neretva Canton) even decided to support project outcomes further by hiring experienced facilitators to conduct training for all schools in the district.

Note

- 1 Official census data show a population of 8,864 Roma in Bosnia and Herzegovina; however, unofficial estimates by NGOs show a population of between 40,000 and 50,000.
- 2 For more information about the Bosnian project, please contact Radmila Rangelov-Jusovic, Director, CEI (radmila@coi-stepbystep.ba);
- 3 For more information about the Parenting with Confidence or Getting Ready for School materials, please contact Sarah Klaus at the OSI (sarah.klaus@osf-eu.org).
- 4 For more information about the CEE/CIS regional Early Childhood Development network and the Education for Social Justice Program please contact Aija Tuna at the ISSA (atuna@issa.hu).