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*Step by Step Roma Special Schools
Initiative:*

**Evaluation Report
Year 3
Summary**

Prepared by:



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Acknowledgements

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Linda E. Lee
Proactive Information Services Inc.
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Table of Contents

Chapter I	1
Introduction	1
A. Background	1
B. <i>Step by Step Roma Special Schools Initiative</i>	2
C. Project Evaluation	4
Chapter II	6
Summary, Conclusions,	
and Recommendations	6
A. Key Results and Conclusions	6
B. Recommendations	12
C. Suggestions for Future Research	15
Glossary	17

Chapter I Introduction

A. Background

Roma children experience little success in schools in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe. While much research has examined the socio-economic conditions that contribute to their academic failure, very few models of successful education have been implemented. The *Step by Step Roma Special Schools Initiative* developed and tested a model that focuses on creating conditions that foster educational success for Roma children in the early years of school.

This pilot project, supported by the *Open Society Institute* in New York, has been in existence since the fall of 1999 in special schools in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, and Slovakia and in special schools and remedial mainstream classes in Hungary. The project operates under the auspices of the national *Step by Step* NGO's that are all members of *ISSA*, the *International Step by Step Association*. An international coordinating team works with national teams to support and monitor project implementation and evaluation.

The project was based on the conviction that Roma children are mislabelled as 'mentally handicapped' and misplaced in special education. The project began with the hypothesis that, given appropriate conditions for learning, the majority of Roma children are capable of academic achievement to the level of mainstream curriculum standards.

Proactive Information Services Inc.¹, a social research company with extensive experience in educational evaluation, was contracted to provide an independent test of the project's hypothesis and to lead a team of national researchers. Distinguished researchers from each of the four countries collected and analyzed additional data required by their national ministries of education.

¹ Proactive Information Services Inc. was established in 1984 specifically to provide research and evaluation services to clients in the public and non-profit sectors. Proactive's clients include ministries of education, the Canadian International Development Agency, foundations, and other NGO's.

This report represents the final technical evaluation report, based primarily on data from the second and third years of the pilot project. Separate national research reports are available from the *Step by Step* NGO in each participating country.

B. *Step by Step Roma Special Schools Initiative*

1. Project Goals

The goals of the *Step by Step Roma Special Schools Initiative* were as follows:

- ▲ to identify those Roma children who are misplaced in special schools,
- ▲ to improve their academic skills, and
- ▲ to integrate them into mainstream education after three years,
- ▲ to develop a viable model of school success for Roma children in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, and
- ▲ to propose changes in national education policies to support implementation of such a model.

2. Project Approach and Structure

Since the basic premise of the project was that a significant number of Roma children in special schools are not 'mentally handicapped,' the approach, by necessity, was a personalized one that emphasized the following components:

- ▲ building commitment among school staff to recognize the maximum potential of the children,
- ▲ developing teamwork at all levels of the project,
- ▲ regularly and actively supervising teachers on a professional basis,
- ▲ emphasizing the professional development of all school staff, and
- ▲ committing to an objective and systematic evaluation research process.

The approach to the pilot project also included a management structure with an international management team consisting of a project director, master teacher trainer, and independent researcher/evaluator. The executive directors of the *Step by Step* NGO's in the four countries, who worked closely with the project director, each had their own national team including master teacher trainer(s) and researcher(s). Master teacher trainers and researchers also worked closely with their counterparts on the international team.

A system of quality control, implemented from project inception, had the following elements:

- ▲ high expectations of all staff for project success,
- ▲ monthly site visits by the national master teacher trainers, as well as regular visits by international project staff,
- ▲ monthly reports by national master teacher trainers with feedback from the international master teacher trainer to include action plans for the month,
- ▲ systematic and regular data collection focused on elements of the model and desired outcomes with articulated indicators of success,
- ▲ regular national and international management meetings, and
- ▲ a formal feedback system for all aspects of the project.

3. Project Model

The educational model was founded on the experience of validated educational practice. The key components of the model are:

- ▲ high expectations for success, coupled with the use of mainstream primary school curriculum to replace the special school curriculum,
- ▲ the *Step by Step* early childhood methodology as the vehicle for delivering curriculum and supporting parental involvement,
- ▲ anti-bias education for all teachers and administrators in the project,
- ▲ appropriate methodologies for second language learners, and

- ▲ placement of a Roma family coordinator/teaching assistant at each site to assist in the classroom, act as a role model for children,

integrate Roma language, culture, and history into the curriculum, and serve as a liaison between the family and the school.

4. Project Contribution

In summary, the project was not designed to provide all the solutions for promoting educational achievement of the Roma population. The fundamental purpose of this 'experiment' was to test, through use of an objective and systematic evaluation process, the hypothesis that Roma students can succeed to the standards of mainstream education given the appropriate conditions for learning. It was recognized, however, that within the project classes, there may indeed be some students who have lower cognitive ability and, therefore, would not be expected to achieve mainstream standards.

In summary, learnings from the project not only confirm the hypothesis that Roma children are misplaced and that many Roma children in special education settings can be academically successful. Project results also provide insight into some of the conditions that support school success for Roma children.

C. Project Evaluation

The evaluation was designed to provide an independent assessment of the learning outcomes and project model. The independent international researcher from Proactive Information Services Inc. worked as part of the project's international management team, ensuring that the evaluation was congruent with the evolving nature of the project while, at the same time, assuring a systematic and objective evaluation process.

The evaluation framework focused on monitoring and assessing desired project outcomes as identified in the project model:

- ▲ academic success, as evidenced by achievement of mainstream curriculum standards, and
- ▲ appropriate conditions created to support academic success for Roma children as evidenced by positive student behaviours and attitudes toward school, high levels of parent involvement, supportive

parental attitudes,² and inclusive classroom environments that support student learning.

Together these outcomes, to the extent they could be achieved, would set the stage for successful integration of Roma children in the pilot project into mainstream education after three years.

This document represents a summary of the Evaluation Report Year 3 of the *Step by Step Roma Special Schools Initiative*. The full document is available from the *Open Society Institute*, New York.

² The term 'parent' is used in this report to refer to parents, guardians, and caregivers.

Chapter II

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

A. Key Results and Conclusions

In summary, the results of the *Step by Step Roma Special Schools Initiative* demonstrate that:

- ▲ Many Roma children in the schools and classes for the 'mentally handicapped' are capable of performing to the standards of the mainstream curriculum; therefore,
- ▲ A large number of Roma children are mislabelled as 'mentally handicapped' and misplaced in special education; furthermore,
- ▲ The system of testing and placement of students into special education is inadequate, inappropriate, and possibly biased.

Additionally, the research and evaluation results demonstrate the effectiveness of the project model. Five key elements combine to present a model that fosters educational success for Roma children in the early years of school. At its core, the model highlights the importance of creating inclusive classrooms where good pedagogy and high expectations for academic success are the norm.

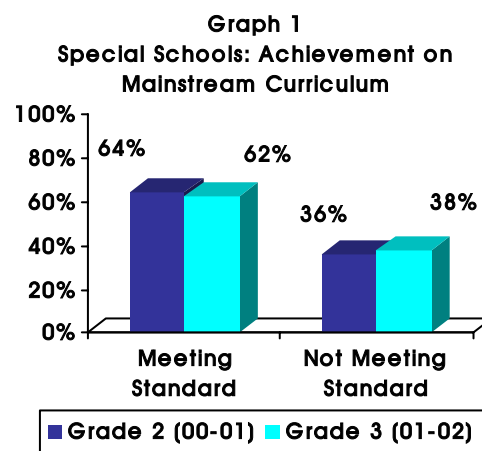
Project Model

1. high expectations, coupled with the use of mainstream curriculum,
2. *Step by Step* as the vehicle for delivering curriculum and supporting parental involvement,
3. anti-bias education,
4. methodologies for second language learners, and
5. Roma family coordinator to act as a role model, to integrate Roma language, culture, and history into the curriculum, and to serve as a liaison between family and school.

1. Student Achievement on Mainstream Curriculum

Roma children in the special education pilot sites can achieve the academic standards of the mainstream primary curriculum.

After two years, 64% of children in the grade 2 special education pilot classes (Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Slovakia) were achieving at a level where they could be integrated into mainstream education. However, these students remained in the pilot classes in grade 3 where they continued to follow mainstream curriculum and solidify their skills. At the end of grade 3, 62% of students in the special education pilot classes were achieving at a level that would indicate they could be integrated into mainstream grade 4 classes (Graph 1).



As in the year two data, students who entered grade 1 speaking only Romani, with no knowledge of the official language of the country, were most likely to achieve at a level where they could be integrated into mainstream education. Again, as was noted in the Interim Report, this suggests that a strong background in home language can be an asset rather than a deficit. It also suggests that children who enter school without any knowledge of the official language are likely to be mislabelled as 'mentally handicapped.'

Of children in the grade 2 special education classes in Hungary, 53% (11 of 21 children) were meeting the standards of the mainstream curriculum to a level at which they could be integrated, a slight decrease from their grade 1 success rate of 65% (13 of 20 children).

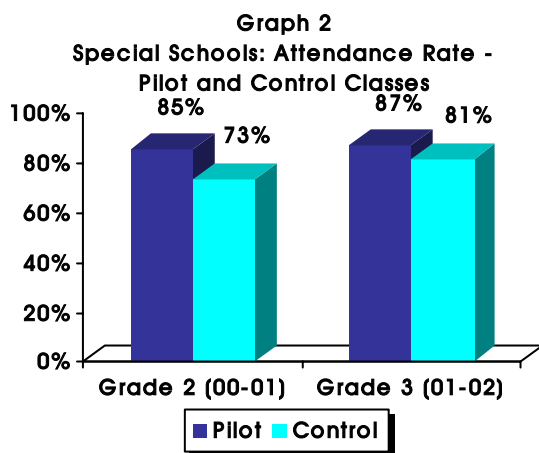
Of the children in the Hungarian grade 3 remedial classes, 88% (23 of 26 children) were meeting the expectations of the mainstream curriculum, similar to 86% (25 of 29 children) in the previous year.

Conclusion: Data on student achievement indicate that the majority of students in the pilot classes are able to meet the requirements of the mainstream curriculum. These results support the hypothesis that Roma children are mislabelled as ‘mentally handicapped’ and misplaced in special education settings.

2. Conditions Supporting Student Achievement

Student Attendance: Overall, children in the special education pilot classes have higher rates of attendance than their peers in the control classes.

In both grade 2 (2000-2001) and grade 3 (2001-2002) students in the special education pilot classes had higher rates of attendance than



students in the control classes (Graph 2). However, significant differences in attendance were not evident between the pilot and control sites in Hungary.

Unlike the previous year, total days absent was correlated with ethnicity, with Roma students missing significantly more days of school than their non-Roma peers. However, when the pilot sites were

considered without the control sites, the correlation between absence from school and ethnicity weakened, suggesting that the environment of the pilot sites was a factor that encouraged Roma children to come to school.

Conclusion: Data on student achievement indicate that conditions in the pilot sites have a positive impact on student attendance. Data also show that, under the conditions of the pilot classes, Roma children have high rates of attendance, refuting the belief that Roma children do not attend school regularly.

Student Attitudes: Roma children in the pilot sites have positive attitudes towards school; they like “studying and learning.”

Students were interviewed in the pilot and control sites. Students in the pilot sites were more likely to have a positive attitude about school than were students in the control sites. In addition, 23% of students in the pilot sites told the interviewers that they enjoyed “studying and learning,” this response was volunteered by 14% of students in the control sites.

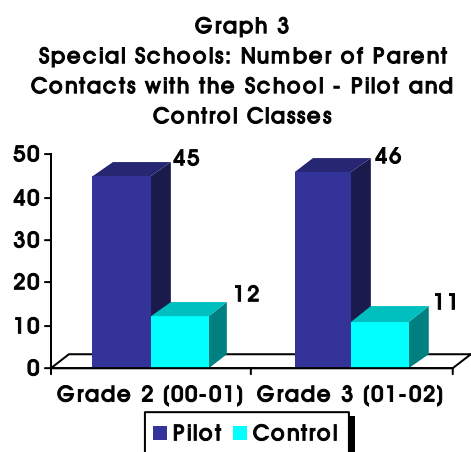
In the special education pilot sites, there was a strong relationship between those students who indicated that they liked school because of mathematics and their achievement in mathematics.

Finally, in the pilot classes, there appears to be some relationship between the students’ overall positive attitudes towards school and liking their teacher/teaching assistant. Students who mentioned their teacher or teaching assistant as a reason for enjoying school were somewhat more likely to have overall positive attitudes towards school.

Conclusion: Roma children like school; they like learning. Given the appropriate conditions, including the expectation that they can achieve at school, Roma children will not only be academically successful, but also will enjoy learning.

Parent Involvement: Roma parents in the pilot sites were more involved with their child’s school, than were parents in the control sites.

Parents whose children were in the pilot sites had more contact with the school than did parents with children in the control sites (Graph 3). When their children were in grade 3, parents connected with the pilot schools an average of 46.3 times, as compared to 11.2 times in the control schools. This was almost the identical result to the previous year.

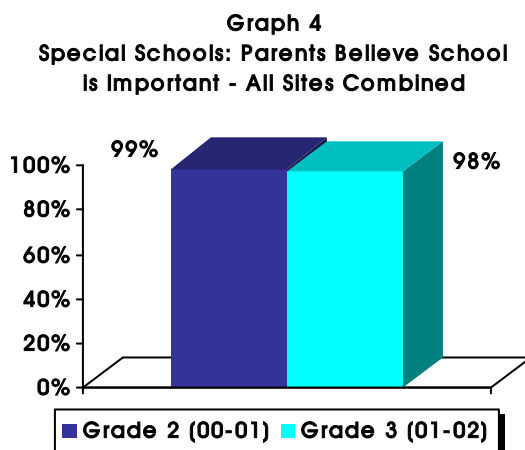


Parental involvement or contact with the school was also correlated with the teachers' attitudes towards Roma; that is, in cases where teachers expressed negative attitudes to Roma parents and children, parents were less likely to come to the school.

Conclusion: If valued and welcomed at school, as they were in the pilot sites, Roma parents will become involved with their child's school and will sustain their involvement over time. They will come to school, visit classrooms, and meet with teachers, thus supporting their child's school success.

Parent Attitudes: Roma parents in both the pilot and control sites place a high value on education and want their children to succeed.

Virtually all parents, in both years two and three and in both pilot and control sites, expressed a belief in the importance of education (Graph 4).



Overall, attitudes of parents across pilot and control sites were very similar. One area of difference was that 14% of parents in the pilot sites expressed the hope that their child would be able to participate in mainstream primary education. No parents in the control sites had this expectation.

Conclusion: Roma parents in the project believe in the importance of education. Interviews with parents

of students in the pilot classes also suggest that, if Roma parents see their children learning mainstream curriculum, they may have hopes that their child will be integrated into mainstream education.

Staff Attitudes and Practices: School staff in the pilot sites saw benefits, both personally and professionally, from their participation in the project. Teachers in pilot sites were more likely to focus on academics than were their counterparts in control sites. Inter-relationships among aspects of good classroom practice were also evident in the data from the pilot classes.

Staff in the pilot sites believed that participating in this project would have **long-term benefits** for them. These benefits were often related to improved teaching methods.

Teachers' "**focus of teaching**" refers to whether academics were the focal point or emphasis for classroom activity. Academic focus was found to correlate with site status; that is, an emphasis on academics was more often found in the pilot class than in control sites. In addition, there was a correlation between teacher attitudes towards Roma and whether they stressed academics in their teaching; that is, those teachers with positive attitudes toward Roma children and families were more likely to focus on teaching academic subjects. This finding suggests that teacher attitudes do indeed influence classroom pedagogy.

In the pilot classes, there was a relationship between having an **inclusive classroom environment** and teachers using regular curriculum. An "inclusive classroom" was characterized by evidence of Roma culture in the classroom (e.g., books that include Roma people and experiences, Roma history, Roma music), as well as by classroom features, such as students talking about their own lives, language free from bias, and students working together in mixed groups. Perhaps, not surprisingly, there was also a relationship between having an inclusive classroom environment and teachers' implementation of *Step by Step* methodology. Furthermore, there was a correlation between appropriate student behaviours in the classroom and implementation of *Step by Step*.

In year 2, the influence of **Step by Step** methodology on student achievement was evident. Classes where the greatest proportion of students were achieving to the standards of the mainstream curriculum were those where *Step by Step* had been most thoroughly implemented. This same correlation was not found in year 3, although *Step by Step* implementation was correlated with other positive classroom characteristics, as noted above.

Conclusion: The data illustrate the inter-relationships that exist among factors in the classroom environment, including teacher attitudes. The results also show that teachers in the pilot classes had learned from and valued their participation in the *Step by Step Roma Special Schools Initiative*.

3. In Summary

Teacher attitudes, pedagogy and, to some degree, the student attitudes and achievement are intertwined. It is often difficult – and perhaps inappropriate – to dissect educational settings. Classrooms are themselves mini-communities, holistic in nature. However, the data from this research suggest that the pilot classes clearly contain features not evident in the control classes; features that promote positive student attitudes and behaviours, as well as desirable parental attitudes and behaviours.

Furthermore, the majority of children in the pilot classes, although labelled as ‘mentally handicapped,’ are able to perform according to the standards of mainstream curriculum. Clearly, inclusive classrooms, where good pedagogy and high expectations for success are the norm, result in educational success for Roma children. Replicating the elements of good educational practice found in the project model would not only promote the learning of Roma children, but would also serve to benefit all children during the critical early years of school.

B. Recommendations

The results of the *Step by Step Roma Special Schools Initiative* hold many implications for change both at the school and system level. One could also look beyond the project to validated practices in areas such as special education or the education of minority students and find other suggestions for reform. However, the recommendations presented are those which flow from the project research results. What follows are three sets of recommendations, all of which hold policy implications.

1. Testing and Placement

Clearly the system of assessing students and determining their educational placement requires reform. With the results of the *Step by Step Roma Special Schools Initiative* demonstrating the misplacement of students, it is recommended that:

- ▲ tests be developed that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for Roma children,

- ▲ testing focus not only on the areas where students have difficulty, but also on identification of their strengths, and
- ▲ decisions on placement begin with the assumption that Roma children are as cognitively capable as any other children.

2. Teacher Training

The model used in the *Step by Step Roma Special Schools Initiative* includes key elements of validated educational practice, including good early childhood pedagogy (such as *Step by Step*), inclusive classrooms where Roma culture is highlighted and valued, as well as methodologies for second language learning. Therefore, it is recommended that:

- ▲ pre-service education include good early childhood pedagogy, second language teaching strategies, approaches for promoting parent involvement, anti-bias education/training, as well as specific training on the teaching of minority students (history, language, cultural norms), and
- ▲ in-service education of practising teachers include the same areas as listed above for pre-service education, as well as a focus on how to work collaboratively and effectively with other adults in the classroom, in this case the Roma family coordinator/teaching assistant.

3. Support for School Success

Appropriate support must be available to promote the effective integration of Roma children into mainstream education. Therefore, changes need to occur within the system both at the educational level and at the level of economic support for Roma families.

Educational Support

In order to promote school success for Roma children, it is recommended that the following be embedded in the educational system and financially supported by government:

- ▲ the position of Roma family coordinator/teaching assistant, with the person selected for the position being a respected member of the local Roma community,
- ▲ support for children and families at the pre-school level to foster official language acquisition, as well as pre-literacy and numeracy skills in order to avoid misplacement in special education and to prepare children for mainstream school, and
- ▲ systems of quality assurance be developed and implemented to ensure that the conditions in schools are those which support the education of Roma students. (See elements of the project model.)

Economic Support

Given the results of the interviews with Roma parents in the pilot project, it is evident that they want their children to have access to quality, mainstream education. This is only viable if the following economic policies are put in place alongside the previously mentioned educational reforms:

- ▲ basic educational materials are provided to all students,
- ▲ financial subsidies for items such as food, transportation, and boarding are based on economic need rather than the type of institution the child attends (i.e., financial allocations are tied to the child/family, rather than to the institution), and
- ▲ changes to policy be made to ensure that special education is not financially attractive to poor parents.

4. In Summary

The lessons learned from the *Step by Step Roma Special Schools Initiative* clearly hold implications for change both within and beyond the school and classroom. Policies and practices that create a **comprehensive approach** to supporting Roma children and families must be implemented. If real opportunities are to exist for Roma children and youth to participate successfully in mainstream education, the system must provide a continuum of appropriate educational, social, and financial support to classrooms, schools, families, and communities.

C. Suggestions for Future Research

1. Research in Year 4

In the integration year, data collection is continuing (that is, school year 2002-2003 when students are in grade 4). The methodology has been developed to answer the following questions regarding students who are following the mainstream curriculum in grade 4, as well as those who have remained in special education and are still using mainstream curriculum.

Students Following Mainstream Grade 4 Curriculum

1. To what degree are students who are following mainstream curriculum (Roma and non-Roma) successful?
2. Where do Roma students have the greatest success (i.e., in what type of school setting, for example, *Step by Step* or non-*Step by Step* classes)?
3. What elements of the model contribute to student success?
4. What are the attitudes of the various participating groups (i.e., Roma and non-Roma parents, teachers, and Roma and non-Roma students)?

Students Following Mainstream Curriculum and Remaining in Special Education

5. Are there students who remain in special education, following mainstream curriculum, who can be integrated after grade 4? (i.e., What is their attendance? What is their academic achievement?)

In some cases, data collection instruments remain virtually the same as in previous years, while in other instances, instruments have been revised to reflect the realities of the integration year. Also, attention has been paid to developing ways to capture the impact of the role of the Roma family coordinator, thus expanding the learning about what aspects of the model are most powerfully contributing to the success of Roma students.

2. Future Research

Longitudinal studies are relatively rare in educational research. Ideally, tracking the pilot students over the course of their educational career would provide insights into whether the model for early intervention tested in this project has any long term effects on Roma children. For example, are the students who participated in the pilot project more likely to complete primary school? Are they more likely to complete high school? The student data files (student profiles) created for this project provide a rich resource that could be used as the basis for longitudinal research. These data files will be available to country teams who wish to undertake longitudinal tracking of students.

Regardless of the extent and specific focus of future research, it will be important to continue in the spirit of learning more about what can be done to support the educational success of Roma children.

Glossary

The following is a list of terms and their definitions as used in this report.

Control (or Comparison) Sites: Special education or remedial classes with similar characteristics to those included in the project (for example, same proportion of Roma children, similar communities). These classes were used for research purposes in order to compare their results on selected measures to the results in the pilot classes.

Inclusion: A philosophy or value system which holds that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement, and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their education. The philosophy of inclusion transcends the idea of physical location, incorporating basic values that promote participation and social interaction which result in a sense of belonging for students.

Integration into Mainstream Education: Students participate in mainstream education, whether that be by physically placing students in mainstream classes in mainstream schools or by changing the profile of the special school so that students are taking mainstream curriculum and receiving recognition for achievement of mainstream education standards.

Integration into Mainstream Education with Support: Certain students are meeting the standards or expectations of the mainstream curriculum at a minimal level, but will require support to continue to achieve at this level and not fall behind in mainstream education. For example, support might include programs for academic support, such as tutoring/mentoring.

ISSA: The International Step by Step Association is a membership organization which promotes open society values in education, equal access to quality education for all children, strong family involvement and community participation. ISSA is a network of 28 national organizations which operate the national Step by Step Programs and represent a professional network of educators who cooperate across borders and nationalities.

Mainstream Curriculum: The content, skills, and concepts that children are expected to learn in mainstream education. The standards or expectations of the mainstream curriculum are, in all the participating countries, much higher than are the expectations in special education.

Master Teacher Trainer: A qualified educational professional with extensive experience who trains teachers in new educational methodologies. A master teacher trainer not only develops and delivers training, but also coaches and supervises teachers in the classroom.

Open Society Institute (OSI): A private operating and grant making foundation that develops and implements a range of programs in civil society, education, media, public health, and human and women's rights, as well as social, legal, and economic reform. OSI is at the center of an informal network of foundations and organizations active in more than 50 countries worldwide that supports a range of programs. Established in 1993 by investor and philanthropist George Soros, OSI is based in New York City and operates network-wide programs, grant making activities in the United States, and other international initiatives. OSI provides support and assistance to Soros foundations in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Guatemala, Haiti, Mongolia, South, Southern and West Africa.

Pilot (or Experimental) Sites: Special education or remedial classes selected to be part of the project and, therefore, having access to the supports and expectations inherent in the project model.

Remedial Classes or Reduced Class Size (Hungary): A type of class found in a mainstream school, run by the local government, where class sizes are a maximum of 15 students. In order to overcome disadvantages or to 'catch up,' students are deemed to need special educational treatment and methodologies. Curriculum standards in these classes are lower than in the mainstream ones. Often these classes are referred to as 'Gypsy classes' because of the over-representation of Roma students. In Hungary most of these classes cease to exist after grade 3; students are then placed into mainstream classrooms or into special education.

Roma Family Coordinator/Roma Teaching Assistant: A Roma person from the local community who works collaboratively with the teacher in the classroom to support students' learning, particularly (but not limited to), incorporating Roma language and culture in the classroom, and encouraging and supporting the meaningful involvement of parents.

Romani: Language of the Roma people.

Special Schools: Schools for children who have been labeled as 'mildly mentally handicapped.' In Hungary special schools are called *Eltéro tantervu általános iskola* (Elementary School with Differentiated Curriculum). In the Czech Republic they are known as *Zvlastni skola*, *Specialni skola*.