
Transforming the Role of Teaching Assistants in Slovakia

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Placing teaching assistants from the local community into classrooms is a common strategy used by schools all over the world to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps between schools and non-mainstream communities. The premise behind this practice is that the inclusion of teaching assistants will enable children from marginalized groups to be more successful academically. The teaching assistant can help children with the differences in languages spoken between the home and the school, be a link between the home culture and the culture of the educational system, and cultivate parents' support for their children's schooling process. The teaching assistant becomes a person that everyone in the community respects and a role model for the children on how to be a successful person, both in their own culture and in the mainstream culture.

In theory, this is what is supposed to happen. However, the reality often looks very different. In many classrooms, teaching assistants are seen serving students snacks, cleaning up after teachers or students, or watching the students on the playground while the teacher takes a break. Instead of being seen as a role model for students, the teaching assistants are placed in the position of being "babysitters," "maids," or even the "mother." What begins as a strategy to provide "at-risk" students the tools to meet mainstream curriculum standards, turns into a vehicle for keeping marginalized students in subservient positions in their societies.

If the purpose of the teaching assistant is to help



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students succeed academically, then they must be seen as equal partners in the classroom. This article focuses on a case study in Slovakia where a new style of cooperation was developed between teachers and teaching assistants. Through the process of redefining the Roma teaching assistant's role to be that of a co-teacher and agent of change in their communities, Slovakia documented an increase in Roma students' self esteem and academic performance as well as parent and community participation at school (Wide Open School Foundation, 2001; Rona, S. & Lee, L., 2001).

Background

In discussing the discrepancy between the theory of having teaching assistants help children in classrooms achieve higher academic results and the reality of using them in subservient roles, the response often has been, "teachers have teaching degrees and teaching assistants do not." However, there is not a correlation between years of education a person has and the ability to be a good teacher. In reality, anyone can be a good teacher. The best teachers are those who relate to peo-

ple by making them feel valued and capable. They are the ones who feel confident in their ability to give another person something—be it knowledge of a subject or the development of a skill. Educators with teaching degrees do not have a monopoly on teaching. Family members, friends, community members, co-workers, are all teachers in our lives.

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If we believe that we are educating for democracy and a more just and fair society, then it is essential to stop treating the teaching assistant as a person who is only capable of assisting the teacher. Cummins (1996) points out that the identities that are negotiated in schools between educators, students, and communities are reflected in the “patterns of power relations in the



wider society.” When members from the dominant group find a way to define themselves as superior (teachers who have a teaching certificate) and the members of the subordinate group as inferior (teaching assistants who do not), it is “a coercive exercise of power by a dominant group that is detrimental to the subordinated group” (p. 14). The role model that is being provided to those students is that of a person who serves those from the mainstream culture. Students can internalize this to mean that people from their culture will always be subordinate to those from the mainstream culture.

Cummins (1996) advises us to change this pattern of coercive relations of power to collaborative relations of

power where all participants in the relationship are *empowered* and have a greater sense of efficacy to create change in their lives or social situations (p.15). This is not a new concept. Dewey (1916) pointed out nearly a century ago that “all members of a group must have an equitable opportunity to receive and to take from others... Otherwise, the influences which educate some into masters, educate others into slaves” (p. 84). When the job of the teaching assistant in the classroom is only to assist, their ability to also be teachers and leaders is not acknowledged; this is not only demeaning to them, but their ability to help the students, their schools, and their communities is greatly reduced.

Case Study in Slovakia

The concept of having Roma teaching assistants become equal partners was a factor that contributed to the success of the Step by Step (SBS) Roma Special Schools Initiative in Slovakia. Roma teaching assistants were employed in classrooms with the intention to raise Roma students' academic performance to that of the mainstream curriculum. The project was an experiment in five classrooms in special schools where 92 percent of the students were Roma. The project's hypothesis was that Roma children were being misplaced in special schools; they did not have mental disabilities; and the majority of Roma children, when given appropriate conditions for learning, would be fully capable of academic achievement on mainstream curriculum standards (Rona, S. & Lee, L., 2001). In Slovakia, this proved to be true with 78 percent of students in these five classrooms being able to pass tests at a 75 percent level or higher on mainstream school curriculum standards (Wide Open School Foundation, Research Report, 2001).

There were five components to the program that contributed to the success rate of these students: the use of the mainstream primary school curriculum as opposed to the special education curriculum, the Step by Step methodology to deliver the curriculum, the use of appropriate methodologies for second-language learners, workshops in anti-bias education for school staff mem-

bers, and the placement of Roma teaching assistants in each classroom.

The promotion of Roma teaching assistants in the Slovakian educational system and the redefinition of their role has been a goal of the Wide Open School Foundation since 1994. The first step was to define what teaching assistants needed to do and the following indicators were developed for the position (Koncoková, 2000):

- Comes from the same community as his/her pupils
- Knows the parents and other community members of his/her pupils and demonstrates enthusiasm for working with them
- Speaks Roma language
- Has respect and an appreciation for the customs and traditions of Roma families
- Has some experience working with children
- Will participate in trainings covering the Step by Step methodology and anti-bias education
- Be actively involved in the education of the students both during the official school day and after school activities.

The Foundation then advocated for the job to be supported by the Labor Office and to provide a course for both potential Roma teaching assistants and teachers who would have them included in their classrooms. This course, which encompasses 150 hours of theory and practice, was developed by the Foundation, accredited in September 2001, and is now being piloted in schools in Slovakia.

Part of the content of the course was built on the Foundation's experience in the SBS Roma Special Schools Project. The content of the course (Wide Open School Foundation, 2001) includes not only the Step by Step methodology, but also includes work in the history, ethnography, and sociology of the Roma. In addition, the course includes work in the area of community education that entails assessing a community's needs and how to use current resources to meet those needs. The participants are also required to do project work where they develop new projects that would help in meeting the needs of the community.

Including the teachers in the process as well validates the importance of the teaching assistant's role in the community.

The New Roles for Teaching Assistants in the Slovakian Model

Research (Cummins, 1989; Fine, 1991; Garcia, 1988; Lee, Bryk, and Smith, 1993) has found that educators who feel empowered themselves have higher expectations of their students, and their students develop the ability, confidence, and motivation to succeed academically. In the Slovakian model, this empowerment of Roma teaching assistants was developed by expanding their roles to include being 1) co-teachers in charge of small group cooperative learning activities, 2) teachers who provided activities to maintain and strengthen Roma culture, and 3) family advocates who brought elements of the home culture into the school and who resolved issues between the school and home when they arose.

Having assistants work as co-instructors helps teachers be able to individualize instruction for their students. In Slovakia, the academic success of the students was impacted by the amount of classroom instruction and practice that was done in small groups working cooperatively together. Although the way that the teaching assistants worked varied from site to site, all students benefited from having two teachers in the classroom. For example, at one of the sites there was a group of children in the class with very noticeable learning disabilities. At that site, the teacher chose to work with that group because of her special education background and the teaching assistant worked with those



students who could do the mainstream curriculum. At other sites, where the students' abilities were more uniform, the same kind of cooperative learning activities were divided among the students with the teacher working with one group and the assistant working with a different group.

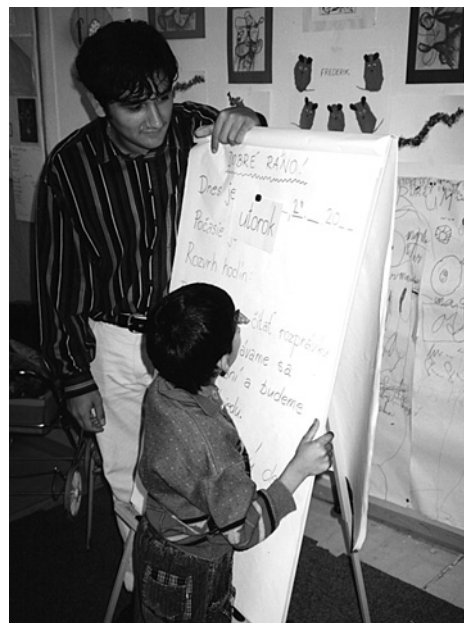
Another factor that the teaching assistants were able to provide for their students' success was the input of Roma culture into the classrooms. In all of the classrooms, the teaching assistant acted as the expert on Roma culture. Research has shown that cultural maintenance can have a positive influence on academic achievement (Rumbaut and Ima, 1987; Hayes, Bahruth, and Kessler, 1991; Abi-Nadar, 1993; Igoa, 1995; Cummins, 1996; Nieto, 1996). Time was given everyday for stories, songs, art, etc., that were activities led solely by the assistant. It was interesting to observe that during such

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times, one would even see the teacher preparing or cleaning up after the snack. The teachers then used the material that the teaching assistants brought into the classroom to plan with the assistant instructional activities for the students in reading, writing, and math.

As the importance of family involvement in their children's education has been widely documented, another role of the teaching assistants was to improve the communication between schools and homes. When the role of the teaching assistant is subservient, schools can destroy the bridge to the parents and community that they are seeking to build. The parents see that the mainstream culture does not respect the teaching assistant, so why should they? However, in Slovakia, when students and families saw the teaching assistant (who was from their own community) as a valued member of a teaching team who also had knowledge to impart, an increase in both family and community involvement was observed. For example, in the pilot classrooms in the pro-

gram there were an average of eighty-three parent contacts, and in the control classrooms there were only eight (Wide Open School Foundation, 2001).



It should be noted that the focus on family involvement in Slovakia went beyond the traditional practices as attendance at parent-student conferences, parent

meetings, or helping their children with homework. One study (Fruchter, Galleta, and White, 1993) found that when schools had a strong commitment to reducing the gap between home and school cultures by building on the values, languages, and culture of the home, that even the most reluctant parents became more involved. This idea was replicated in Slovakia by the teaching assistant inviting parents and community members come to school to tell stories, talk about the history of the community, and do other activities at school like cooking or making things that are also done at home.

Beyond Academics — The Future

The changing role of the teaching assistant has a positive affect not only on the academic performance of the students, but the entire community. According to Eva Koncoková, Country Director of the Slovakian Step by Step program, the professional development of the teaching assistants and teachers motivates the rest of the school to become more professional. In addition, she feels that it is important to expand the definition of the learning environment from just the school to the entire community. This way the teaching assistant can make a positive influence on the



children's whole environment and not just that of their school environment. By empowering the teaching assistant, who is from the local community, the program also works to empower the other members of that community.

To use Dewey's words of educating "some into masters and others into slaves," a dominant group can make a non-dominant group into slaves who are dependent on their masters when they are the only ones who have power to solve a problem. In Slovakia, the goal has been to make the teaching assistants familiar with resources that are available to the community's members, as well as how to develop new programs and resources for the community. The teaching assistants, as opposed to a person from the dominant group, become the agents of change in their communities. The ownership and sustainability of new projects are increased because the projects come from the community and not from the outside.

In conclusion, students, families, schools, and communities will all benefit from redefining the role of the teaching assistant so that power is shared instead of being held by those from the dominant culture.

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