

Multicultural Education Conference  
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School Success for Roma Children  
*from Policy to Practice – from Practice to Policy*

speech by Susan Rona

On your agenda it is said School Success For Roma Children – from Policy to Practice. I added “from Practice to Policy”, because one of the questions raised earlier by Hristo was how do we implement policy. Linda D. Hammond of Columbia University and Teachers’ College in New York said that policy is only as good as the people, who implement it. Even if it depends on the smallest committee nominator, it is the teacher in the classroom, who knows how good the policy is.

I’d like to begin with some myths. Over the last five years in the region I have heard these myths in every country I have visited. Roma parents don’t care about their children’s education. How do we know?

“They don’t send the to school. They don’t attend parent meetings. They don’t buy them education materials. They send them in dirty and torn clothes, and they don’t supervise their children’s homework. Roma children don’t care about education, after all they don’t do homework. There are many of them who don’t even bother coming to school. They are hard to discipline, they fail continuously and than they drop out. Roma children are not capable of academic success. But they are talented in music and dance, and that only. They don’t speak the language of the majority, they are not ready for school when they come, they have no work habits, have poorly developed basic skills, and they are just not motivated to succeed in school. So they fail continuously.”

That is how to look at the reality, as I see it.

Roma parents, like all parents do care about their children’s education. But they don’t send them to school, because they need to work – to take care of siblings. Because they are discriminated against by teachers and other children, and they don’t see their children benefiting from the education they receive. They don’t attend parent meetings, because they don’t feel welcome and they only hear bad news about their children. They don’t buy education materials, because they are poor. They send them in dirty clothes, because often times they don’t have running water or change of clothing for their children. They don’t supervise their children’s homework, because they may be illiterate. They may never have been shown how to be involved in their children’s education. And it is very foreign to them.

However, Roma children would care about their education, if they understood the language in which they would be taught in, they were able to experience success, felt that someone in their school environment cared, if they knew that their culture and language were expected and respected, if they did not feel invisible, if they had a voice, if they were expected to succeed rather, than fail, and if they did not experience hostility and discrimination from the entire school community. Those were my opening thoughts that I would like you to reflect on.

I think today that school success for Roma children from policy to practice are defined school success as academic success, where all children develop to their full potential. In order to look at a comprehensive approach of addressing this issue, we need to look at the relationship between policy, practice and research. I will address mainly issues of practice, as Peter Rado has really dealt with issues of policy, and research is not something we do very much of in the OSI, so I will only go through it on a passing way. However, I think it is very important to look at all three levels. As Peter said this morning, we need policies to address issues of quality, equity and access. Here are some examples of policies preventing school success for Roma children:

- rigid curriculum requirements that lead to failure;
- culturally biased assessment and placement tests (some of you, who attend my afternoon session on the special schools' project that we are doing in Roma communities, will hear more about that issue);
- policy is created by the majority with minimum minority involvement;
- legislation that pushes children out of school.

For example in Romania if a children is three years overage, he/she is not permitted to re-register in school. Let me translate it for you. A Roma child goes to grade one, fail three times, because they cannot meet the requirement of the curriculum, they can not longer register into grade two – that child is now out of school. And that is a policy.

In countries like Hungary, where we have more liberal legislation, Peter Rado brought to my attention that recently legislation is terms of a special education policy. The Hungarian government suddenly said: “Wait a minute! All these Roma children are in special education, let’s do something about it!” So what they did, is they made it very difficult to place children into special education and they are now those integrated into regular education, but did they address the issues of implementing this policy of “What happens to these children in regular education?”, Will they be any more successful in regular education?” As I spoke to educators across the country, they told me “No. Now, instead of being in classes of eight students, they are going to be in classes with 25 students at the back of the class and ignored.”

Why do we need practice and how does it relate to policy? One of the main reasons we need practice is that we all know that “seeing is believing”. A very good example in this respect is the Step By Step Program. In 1994 the SBS Program began by developing model sites. These sites have been criticized by many as “being rich, full of beautiful equipment that no one could ever replicate”. But as a result of these sites and the systematic training in 1999 we have the following policy results: The Step By Step Program is now accepted as an alternative curriculum in 26 countries, it is in teacher training colleges in all those countries and it is now expanding entirely by itself due to policy intervention, and no longer needs the intervention of the Soros Foundation Network for that to happen.

We can look at a smaller scale example of how “seeing is believing”. In a small village in Slovakia (*Spisska Tomasovce*), Eva Koncokova, an educational reformer in Slovakia, placed a Roma Drop-out Program into the mayor’s office. These Roma huddles were running around above the mayor’s office in city hall. What happened? This little Pilot Project changed the attitude of the whole town to Roma and their schooling issues. A very small and meaningful example of how practice attacks policy. There are many other reasons why we use practice to influence policy. An obvious one is that allows us to try things in a small scale to find out what works

and what cannot be duplicated or where we can go to scale. Research is an area which we have left out in a lot of our work in this network. We need research for reliable data, as a basis for strategy development.

But because I was asked to speak about issues related to practice, let me now look at those issues as they relate to children and teachers, keeping in mind school success for Roma children. Let's look at Roma children's background. They are often poor, malnourished, ill. They are clearly not ready for school, most of them never attended kindergarten, they have never had access to toys or books at school. There are different cultural expectations in a Roma community. Let me give an example. A Roma child in a Roma family is treated as an equal partner, like an adult, a Roma child has a voice, his/her opinion is asked, given freedom to move and be independent. You place this child in a very highly structured, Eastern-European context and the child gets up and goes to the bathroom, because he needs to go to the bathroom. And the teacher says: "What are you doing? You did not ask for permission to go to the bathroom." But I am sure he says to himself: "But I am making decisions about much more important issues than going to the bathroom. Why do I have to ask you? I know I have to go to the bathroom." But the teacher looks at that child and considers him a behavior problem.

They also come to school speaking a different language in many cases, and in most cases what I've seen in Eastern Europe, they are in special education with no education materials or supplies. I've seen in many countries Roma children sitting in classrooms without pencils and papers, while every other child has that equipment. What happens then to the child in school? Often tested in a language he does not speak. He/she experiences hostility and discrimination at all levels. In countries, where they are allowed to stay in schools beyond being three year overage, like in Romania, they repeat the same grade over and over again. In Bulgaria I walked into a grade one class and saw a young girl going through puberty. They are exposed continuously to low academic expectations. And I don't think I have to tell you about the literature on marginalized, on minorities and on drop-outs that tells us that it is only through high academic expectations that these children succeed, and as long as teachers continue to have the lowest possible expectations of them, they will continue to live up to those low expectations. As Roma do not exist in books of any kind, the child learns quickly to hide his/her culture, language and identity. I was shocked to see this in action when I was in a school with Hristo in Bulgaria. I said to Hristo: "Talk to that child, and find out a little bit about how this one landed in special education." Hristo looked at me and says: He understands exactly, what I am saying, but he answers me in Bulgarian. He told me he does not speak Romanian, but he understands exactly, what I am asking. There was not one child in that classroom in Bulgaria, but the child was not willing to open his mouth in Bulgarian.

There are some other issues related to teachers. In my experience most of the teachers in the region are totally unaware of their own biases and discriminatory practices. The teacher, who puts the child in the back of the class is often totally unaware of how this prevents equal access to education to that child. As Heather Iliff said: "We are all biased in North America, but at least we have learnt it is not OK to be biased." The teachers have no experience of Roma culture or communities. They have low expectations of all Roma students and Roma students live up to those expectations. And they very clearly confuse social disadvantage with mental handicap. And in no way do they adapt the environment that are needs of a Roma child.

At present these are the educational options available for the majority of Roma children in the region. They are called integrated, but ignored, sitting in the back of

the class. They are segregated from the majority in Roma classes, as I saw in Romania with lower expectations, worse teachers, no heat in the classroom and no educational materials. Or they are placed in special education with no possibility of improving and being integrated into the regular system. As I visited special education institutions in four countries, in none of these institutions had any child in the special school have ever been integrated in the mainstream system. So a child, who enter special education in grade one is there for a life. And the last option if he/she can take the other three is the drop-out.

Let's take what I've said and relate it to our Soros foundation network. The greatest accomplishments, I believe, have been our initiatives on the ground. I would highlight examples only this is far from an exhaustive list, I have only picked from my head initiatives that came to mind. Here are some examples of wonderful initiatives that are happening on the ground.

In Hungary we have many individual school reform projects in model sites – the school in *Nyirtelek*, with *Lazar Peter*, a very-very talented Roma educator and with *Magda*, the excellent school principle and very-very talented member of the majority, who had the wisdom to find the support to this Roma educator to do this great job. There are many examples of this kind of initiative in Hungary.

In Slovakia there are examples of coordinated comprehensive community projects, which include Step By Step, Community School, Drop-Out Prevention Program, Trade Training for the unemployed, training of Roma teachers and teaching assistants. In Albania: Roma language curriculum and training.

In Macedonia: a wonderful community project for teenagers.

Romania has several initiatives on the ground: a book-writing project with Charles Temple, trying to integrate the Roma present into children's books. Oral History project with *Bird Stasz* going into Roma communities, getting the stories and making sure that they have voice and have the heard. And they also have an affirmative action program for training Roma teachers.

In Kyrgyzstan I have experienced a wonderful multicultural program and although their concerns with Roma are very different, because Roma are not nearly as poor, they did a wonderful job of multicultural education.

In our regional and network programs we have we have a tutoring and mentoring initiative, which came from the region. It was based on a model developed in Hungary and that now exists in the region. The **Step By Step** methodology, which is working very well for Roma children and providing successful outrage for Roma communities. And a new Roma special education initiative, which I will be talking about with my colleagues this afternoon. We have begun in the network the process of sensitization. We have introduced an anti-bias approach through a conference, we did last year. However, there has been no network program developed to date and our efforts have only begun.

What are some of impediments to our accomplishments in the region? I'd like to examine the impediments that prevent us doing more from going wider and broader. Let's look at the internal Soros impediments and the external environmental ones. What are some internal problems that prevent us from succeeding? We have a lot of coherent and comprehensive strategy at national network levels to address the issue of Roma children in schools. We have a lot of communication and coordination between programs both network and national level, leading to duplication, limiting scale and impact. Roma program officers in national foundations often work in isolation. The bias of foundation staff, both Roma and non-Roma the lack of quality

research and data as a basis for decision-making. Let's examine some of the external impediments to our work. These are the internal impediments that came out of my experiment in the network, so please argue with me. External impediments that are not related to us as a network necessarily. Throughout the region there is an overwhelming level of accepted bias at all levels of society from school to government. There is a lot of fair and open policies and even were policies all more fair there is an inability to implement them – as I gave the example of the new policy with regard to special education in Hungary, but we have no implementation plan. We have just removed the children from special education, but we are not doing anything for them. The key issue is the lot of partnerships at all levels between Roma and Roma, non-Roma and non-Roma and between Roma and non-Roma. The majority are patronizing even one well intentioned. They have the attitude of wanting to convert the natives be like us. I have heard over and over in the region teachers and administrators tell me “until all Roma people learn to be like us, there is no hope.” As if *being like us* is the only way to be. There is a total lack of awareness, biased and damaging behavior. I have walked into classrooms in all over the region, where teachers talked about Roma children as if they were not there: “This one is mentally retarded, this one has no parents, this one is sexually abused” – right in front of the children. Total insensitivity and intolerance of Roma culture and social behavior on the part of the majority.

And I'd like to give a little anecdote here. When I first came to Hungary in 1994 to live and wanted to work in a Roma community, I caught up *Varga Gusztav*, who some of you may have known, he is a very talented Roma musician. But he also has a foundation that deals with education of Roma drop-outs. And I wanted to find out what this musician was doing with these kids. So he said: “I only have time from 3 to 4 p.m., so please come to my office, but I really have to go at 4 o'clock, because I am rehearsing with my band.” This band is world-famous, they travel the world over. So I was there at 3 o'clock. At 4 o'clock he looks at me and says: “- Have you had a coffee?” I said no. “So let's go have a coffee.” I was thinking: did not he say he had to go to a rehearsal at four? At 5.30: “- Aren't you hungry? I have not eaten anything today.” I said: “- Yes, but isn't your band waiting for you?” “- Yeah, but do not worry about it.” At six o'clock we sat down to dinner. At ten o'clock was the last time, when I looked at my watch, and I said: “- OK Guszti, please tell me, did you have a rehearsal, or did you just tell me that you had a rehearsal, because you thought “if this woman is boring, I want to be able to get rid of her in an hour”. He says: “- No, no, no. I had a rehearsal at four o'clock.” I said: “- Tell me, where are these people?” He says “- By now they have gone home.” “- You did not make a call to say you are not going to be there? You did not look nervous that you are sitting here talking to me. You did not do anything. How are you going to face them tomorrow? What are you going to say?” He says, it is very simple. I am going to go there and say: “- Life took me elsewhere.” And I said: “- Will they kill you?” He said: “- No, they are not going to kill me. They would do exactly the same thing.” I met this person, I got involved in this conversation, it was a moment in time and life, when I could accept that “- They will understand, they would do the same.” I realized then, that cultural expectations and norms are very different. I want to highlight this anecdote, because I thought about it a great deal (this happened in 1994) and one of the stereotypes that is proved to be over and over again with my experiences with Roma people is according to our majority standards they have no sense of time. They are always late – if they come at all. Because time always takes the elsewhere. And I was reminded a story my husband told, who used to be head of aboriginal employment and training in Australia, and

when he would have a meeting with aboriginal person, he always knew that they would not show up. But one day he had a meeting with one of the aboriginal leaders, and it was a very important meeting at ten o'clock on Monday morning. And of course, the guy did not show up. The man shows up three weeks later at ten o'clock on Monday morning. My husband looked at him and said: “- What are you doing?” And he said: “- I am here for a meeting. Isn't it ten o'clock, Monday?” “- Yes, but it was three weeks ago.” “- Yes, but it is ten o'clock on Monday!” These issues bring to mind the needs of cultural tolerance and understanding. And I think the responsibility is on both sides. (I had this issue out with Hristo, not too long ago, but I won't tell the story.) We, the majority must understand that *life takes Roma people elsewhere*. But Roma people also have to understand that we have a limited tolerance for life taking them elsewhere. And somehow, if we want to work together, they have to limit how often life take them elsewhere. And we need to understand as well.

Let's now look at Roma and why we cannot form partnerships with them. They are very damaged and mistrust, not only the majority, but each other. There is lack of leaders with skills to lead, they just don't have a Martin Luther King. There is political infighting and power struggles at all levels. And they want to do, but don't know how, and spend a lot of time complaining. I am reminded of a story in the Czech Republic in a small community called *Rokizcani*, where the Roma community had an uprising and said: “We need *Romipen* in the Step By Step Program.” And we kept saying: “what is *Romipen*?” And they said *Romipen* is Roma culture, history, language, etc. in the classroom and we need it. So Liz Lorant said to them: “- You need it? Then develop it and do it! We, white people cannot develop *Romipen* for you, because your history is an oral one, we don't have any materials to base it on. Do it!” Three years later it is not done. But they still say they need *Romipen*. So, I think Roma people also need look at themselves and their actions in terms of how they look at these issues.

I really believe that when we look at school success for Roma children, we need a strategic framework for action. This action needs to take place at three levels: **prevention**, which deals with pre-school and primary school; **intervention** at the secondary or *Gymnasium* level; and **rehabilitation** for those, who have fallen out of the system and who we want to bring back. This framework, actually, comes from my dissertation on drop-outs, but I feel it works very well with the whole issue of the *School Success for Roma Children*. And we also have to look at this framework of actions at three levels: policy, research and practice. I believe that it is only once we look these three levels in terms of policy, research and practice then we can begin. Let me give you a few examples in terms of prevention, and I would challenge you to take away this very basic framework, and fill it in for yourselves over the next few days. Think about the kind of actions you may want to undertake in terms of policy, research and practice at all of those levels. And I'd like to have your feedback by the end of the conference.

Examples of prevention: children need access to go to early-childhood education, anti-bias training, the development of Roma materials, so that children see themselves represented and they have a voice. The need for Roma teachers, working with communities – these are examples only.

Intervention: what can we do with the kids, who somehow manage, by some miracle, to make it to that secondary level, to keep them there. *Mentoring* and *tutoring* programs – we have some wonderful programs that are beginning to be developed in

Romania, there is no reason why they cannot be spread. Carrier counseling – Roma children have no one to talk to about what they are going to be when they grow up. Not like the majority children, who are told what they were going to be, as I was from the age of five. I was going to be a doctor, but it did not work. Conflict-resolution, pure-mediation, work with communities, dealing with school to work transition. We all need help in the school to work transition, since it is a very frightening moment in the life for anyone to finish school and enter the world of work. But the Roma children especially need help, because they don't have anyone to discuss it with.

In terms of rehabilitation we have drop-outs, we have street children and delinquency. A very important point that I think we all had to consider as a network, and I think it is something that governments are well aware of is that as we go up this level from prevention to rehabilitation, the cost increases. It is much more expensive to keep a child in a juvenile delinquency center, than it is to give him/her a good early childhood education. So the cost increases and the chances of success decrease, because the older the child, or the further the along toward the role of the dropping out of being on the street, the harder is to bring them back. Charles Temple gave me a good example from the US. They did a study recently, looking at the bottom ten percent of reading levels in a grade one class. In other words the children, who are the lowest reading levels in the class. And when they followed these children from grade one to grade four, four years later they found that 84% of those children, who had been at the bottom of the class, and 87% of the children, who had been at the bottom of the class at grade one were still there. That is telling us that in grade we know who is going to fail or be a problem, and in grade one we can predict who is going to drop out of school, because in the literature of drop-outs there is a very high correlation between the difficulty to read and dropping out of school.

So, in fact we know what to do from very early on. There are some suggested actions that we could take at policy level. We need affirmative action to train Roma teachers, social workers and other professionals. We need to reform teacher training institutions and their curricula, to deal with bias, to deal with teaching methodologies, to accommodate diversity of learning styles, and to include Roma culture and history in their curricula. We need to develop fair policies for testing and placement, and we need to put some flexibility to curriculum requirements that are unrealistic and lead to failure for the majority children as well. And we need desperately to get rid of the concept of failure especially in the early grades. A child, who learns at age 6 that he/she does not measure up has that self-image for life. What are some actions at the "grass-roots" level? Grass-roots movements must use a whole school improvement approach that deals with all members of the school community or we will have one classroom that is doing critical thinking and another classroom that is doing debate. We need a comprehensive whole-community approach that combines economic development as oppose to charity, civil society development and education, a holistic approach, as *Peter Rado* mentioned. Teaching methodologies that foster self-esteem and excitement for learning and that are not punitive – these must be methods that give children choices give them a voice, foster initiative and value their own life experiences, and helps them connect what goes on in the classroom to their own lives. We need anti-bias training at all levels.

I'd like to wrap up with a few thoughts. I often see the term "Roma education" and I find it very upsetting. Makes me think of "Black education", "aboriginal education", "mentally retarded education", "blind education" – I believe there is no

such thing “Roma education”. There can be education in Roma language, in Roma culture and history, but any initiatives that I have seen are successful for Roma children are merely good educational practices. They are not “Roma education”. Roma children need what all other children need: a good education. There is a notion of community in the Roma culture that does not exist in the majority culture. That has been very much of a key to their survival. We need to translate this into the classroom and to build on this partnership that exist within the community. We need to help children form the connection between the school and their lives that many of them never had. We need schools a psychologically safe place to be. We need to start with ourselves by examining our own values, beliefs and biases by facing them, before we face others. We need to recognize that everyone in this region has been damaged by years of abuse, both the minority and the majority, and than hurting people often hurt others. We need to recognize that part of the cycle of oppression is that the oppressed internalized the values the oppressor and they are afraid of the freedom of responsibility that comes from their liberation. We need patience and we need to celebrate our small successes. This is not something that one can go to scale tomorrow. We need the sense of community around our actions, because this work is just so hard. And by sense of community, I mean the simple things, making a call to a colleague in support, sending an E-mail saying “How are you doing? I am having trouble with my work.”, giving awards, sending out newsletters, informing each other about what we are doing. At last, but not least good parties.

My work with drop-outs, which lasted over fourteen years, from 1978 to 1992, I worked actively as a practitioner with drop-outs, and people use to say: “- How can you survive it?” I survived it, because I think it is easy to work with majority, middle class children. Any good teacher can work with them. But when you work with children, who has been on the street with the reject of the society, in theoretical terms the value added is incredible. When majority white children succeed, I think if you really ask yourself as an educator, you would probably say with our without you they would probably succeed anyway. Or maybe not as much, but they would succeed. When you look at a drop-out, who has succeeded and come from the street, and becomes a high school graduate, the value added is enormous. We called it *academic therapy*, when we were not going to send drop-out kids psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers or other officers. We were going to force them to succeed academically. Because it was only once they measured up in the terms that society dictated: “Be like everybody else and all the rest would follow.” And through academic success school failure became school success. The sense of hopelessness lead to sense of hope. These youth had lost their dreams. In the case of Roma children, I was reminded yesterday, that they probably never even had dreams for their future. The children I had dealt with *had* dreams, but they lost them. But now they had new dreams for their future. Did we need to evaluate our work? We knew it needed, when 67% of our students were high school graduates and we started with 0%. These were the kids. Who had been thrown out and pushed out. The schools’ academic result rated tenth on the provincial list of high school leaving results. The students in an alternative high school had the tenths highest academic achievement result in the province. The regular high schools were outraged, they said we cheated and I said “- How? These are provincial examinations that come from Quebec city. And the answer was, because we had high academic expectations. There were no special ed. math courses, I was the math teacher, they had to do geometry, algebra, functions like everybody else. We did not offer our equivalent of special education, which was business math.

So, why did we do research? And I want to relate back to the relationship between research, practice and policy. We did evaluate these programs. Not because we did not know that we were doing well, but we did it to influence policy at all levels. I've raised funds to do an evaluation of what I knew was good. We needed 50.000 USD to do an evaluation of this whole project and I went out fundraising to do it. So, we had an evaluation and what happened? Today the Ministry of Education of Quebec boasts of its network of alternative schools, now there are ten in the city of Montreal, and how – it is its greatest achievement. During that time I was very inspired by the work of Paolo Friari and I want to leave you with a few thoughts. In preparing this presentation to you I skimmed through my books that I have not read since my own revolutionary “*Hippie*” days in the 70's, and I started to read the pedagogy of the oppressed. I found it spoke to me even more, than it spoke to me then, after my experience with Roma in the region. Paolo Friari is a Brazilian revolutionary educator, who gave up being a successful lawyer to develop literacy programs in the garbage dumps in Sao Paulo, Brazil. He believed that literacy programs gave power, when they were rooted in people's experiences. In other words not just literacy for the sake of literacy, but literacy programs that were rooted in people's experiences. He combined learning, awareness and action for social justice. He believed that true education, where is critical consciousness, where the following ingredients are present: love, respect, honest communication and shares power. So I would like to leave you with one of my favorite quotes from Paolo Friari: “True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes, which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued. The reject of life is to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving, so that these hands, whether individuals or entire peoples need be extended less and less in supplication so that more and more they become human hands, which work, and working transform the world.” Thank you.