

Newsletter

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Professor Tsiakalos, Chair of the Department of Education at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, together with a team of faculty members, has been fighting against social and educational exclusion of Gypsy children. The team has developed a new curriculum for Gypsy children adapted to their needs; and is now trying to disseminate this curriculum to schools throughout Greece.



Children and mobility
Greece: an approach to irregular school attendance

Professor Georgios Tsiakalos

Policy makers and education experts often attribute the poor level of school results achieved by Gypsy children, and their erratic school attendance, to the Gypsies themselves. Some people see these as a deep rooted lack of interest in education on the part of the Gypsies, and others as a conscious resistance to the dangers of assimilation through education. Rarely is it taken into consideration that the Gypsy

way of life and the organisational format of school systems are mutually incompatible, or that many Gypsies have a limited command of the Greek language.

Policy makers, education experts and public opinion expect this incompatibility to be removed by means of radical changes in the Gypsies' way of life. However this is impossible and undesirable. One solution could be to adjust the school systems to the Gypsies' way of life. This is feasible.

Travelling and school attendance

Many Gypsy families travel from one place to another. They do not travel aimlessly or at random but with definite objectives at certain times of the year to particular places in order to carry out seasonal work such as fruit or cotton picking. This is their means of support; if they do not do this they will starve.

As the children accompany their parents their schooling is interrupted. Gypsy children usually 'disappear' from school towards the end of April, while the school term in Greece continues until mid-June. The children are obliged to repeat the year as they do not then qualify to progress to the next year. This creates a cycle of failure which only ends when they leave school. To the Gypsies, this constantly repeated experience proves that attending school is pointless.

The Gypsy way of life and the school system are incompatible in other areas too, such as the content of the curriculum and the teaching materials used. School books, which in Greece are given free to all pupils, become a source of conflict with the teachers, because they are not looked after properly and are rarely seen as an aid to learning by the Gypsy children.

A child centred literacy programme

Over the last eight years, a group of education experts, psychologists and social scientists at Aristotle University's Education Department have been working on a child centred literacy programme. The group has been supported by the European Community and, for the last year, by the Ministry of Education and local education authorities in Greece. But the most important support is from the Gypsies themselves who collaborate with the group.

The group's most urgent task is to bring literacy to Gypsy children who have either left or never attended school. To do so it has designed appropriate materials drawing on an idea developed in England. Using a simple system of symbols, it divided short readers into seven different colours: one for each day of the week. White is the first day, blue is the second day, green is the third day and so on.

Each 'day' consists, in turn, of seven books of the same colour, which can be distinguished from each other by the number of smiling faces on their respective covers. For example, day two begins with a blue book which has one smiling face on the cover and ends with one with seven faces on the cover. As Gypsy children are very good at remembering colours and numbers, they find it easy to assess their progress to date.

The entire curriculum consists therefore of 49 readers. Each of these also has an accompanying exercise book for practice. To facilitate the teacher, the curriculum includes word cards, word games, exercise books for assessment and instructions for use.

Adapting the approach

These readers, word games, and practice books contain the 343 most frequently occurring Greek words in primary school readers and television guides.

This curriculum has been developed specially to take into account the special characteristics of Gypsy children. For example:

- ✚ if the pupils interrupt their schooling, they can start again where they left off upon their return. Alternatively, they can continue their education by giving information, based on the colour of their books and the number of faces on the cover, to the teacher at their new stopping place about their progress so far;

- ✚ the words selected serve children's needs at both primary school and in everyday situations;

- ✚ the books are cheap to produce and easily replaced, so that if they do get destroyed, this does not cause conflict. On the contrary, the pupils can draw in them, play with them, and when they have finished with them, can keep them or throw them away;

✚ the concentration on a limited vocabulary enables teachers to be flexible and adapt their lessons according to the level of the pupils' knowledge of the Greek language and to their age.

The birth of the literate person

The course has been given the name Genesis. In Modern Greek Genesis means 'birth' and the association in this case is with the birth of the literate person. In spite of the symbolism, the word Genesis has no religious connotation: it is solely based on teaching concepts.

Genesis constitutes a framework for a whole curriculum that is intended to teach more than just literacy. Other subjects evolve around the 'day' that the children are dealing with, as the words develop from the sky and the earth, light and darkness, man and woman, and so on.

But is specially adapted teaching material such as Genesis enough on its own to change the situation of Gypsy children's education? In some cases it might be, but not in all. Children who are not used to going to school, will not alter their behaviour overnight, even if the learning material is particularly attractive to them. However, after a year of using the Genesis method in one encampment, four young gypsy girls succeeded in acquiring their primary school certificate. This was the first success of the Genesis method and it has encouraged many more young people and children.