



Let's turn the page together

Mesélő Édes Anyák (Meséd) Project, Hungary

Education of Mothers for the Education of Children

Education has been, and will continue to be, a major tool for inclusion and empowerment in the modern world. For the Roma years of negative experience and failure in the formal educational institutions have engendered a negative association with learning and books and this has led to the unhealthy status quo concerning education.

The Hungarian educational system, generally, is a vigorous system of learning with much emphasis on performance and results. This highly competitive milieu, in most cases, does not adapt to the needs of a population that have not turned the corner on literacy and abstract learning. The high rate of school dropouts and low achievement levels among the Roma all around the country is clear evidence of this. One outcome of this status of exclusion is that the Roma starts to internalize a feeling of inferiority and lack of confidence. This is perhaps even more keenly felt among women who, as in most traditions, have been oppressed in relation to men. In targeting Roma mothers, a group that has been previously neglected and left out in the attempts to improve the education of Roma children, the Meséd project capitalizes on their domestic role to transform the educational experience of their children.

Roma mothers

It is a fact that motherhood generally starts very early among the Roma. They are often ill-prepared, both in terms of academic ability and the self-confidence that is essential for motherhood, to create change and determine a direction for the growth of their children. Illiteracy and functional illiteracy is quite prevalent amongst young Roma mothers, the great majority of whom have dropped out of school system at an early stage and have met with little or no success or encouragement in their few years of schooling. They therefore lack basic skills in reading and/or the confidence to read aloud. Even though most have learnt to read at a basic level, they do not usually use even these most basic skills. Further education is seen by them as the remotest of possibilities. Being burdened with the responsibilities of caring for a baby, young Roma women often consider the learning period in their life to have ended and see neither reason nor hope for furthering their learning after becoming mothers.

In the past it has been experienced that there is not much interest or commitment shown on the part of the Roma to attend any kind of conventional courses. It was clear to me that if a course is to be attractive to them it had to be unconventional. It needed to be participatory, skill-oriented,

readily applicable and, more importantly, fun and pleasurable.

Based on the aforementioned circumstances, the Meséd project was created to approach the problem in a manner which simultaneously affected different levels of need. By organizing weekly sessions to teach skills in reading simple children's stories and assigning the reading of the same story to their children every night during the week, we are attempting to break the cycle of exclusion at a basic level. On the one hand, it aims at equipping the young mothers with useful skills (and therefore the confidence) that is immediately put to use with their children. On the other hand, children become simultaneous beneficiaries of this training since what is learnt by mothers is directly and immediately transferred to children.

Why story books?

Listening to stories has been a pleasurable activity throughout history for young and old in all cultures. They have served as a tool for transferring knowledge and morals from generation to generation. It appeals both to heart and mind. Thus, reading stories to children is useful and enjoyable both to the mother and the child. Story *telling* is an old tradition, story *reading*, however, is an element of the modern age. By attempting to read stories we make bridges between the two worlds, connecting oral traditions to the modern world of written work.

Hypothesis

Research shows that reading to children before the school age has direct influence on their performance during school years. The more children are read to before they go to school, the more likely they are to be academically successful. Those fortunate children who have the pleasure of being read to before they start school have an 80% greater chance of finishing high school, but the children who have not experienced that pleasure lack the wide vocabulary and metaphorical base from which they can start the formal process of learning.

How the Meséd Project works:

Every week mothers come together, in groups of ten to fifteen, for a two-hour session. These sessions, that are lead by trained facilitators, provide, first of all, a friendly and accepting environment in which the mothers can further and refine their ability of self-expression and self-knowledge. This is done through various activities and games related to the stories read and, eventually, some writing exercises. Every week they receive a new story book and, with the caring help of the facilitator, they all take turns in reading. In the beginning, the mothers experience difficulties and have feelings of embarrassment, but within a couple of months, almost all the participants become fluent. With the encouragement and guidance of the facilitator, the contents of the story are discussed in a participatory manner. The questions and activities that can be used in relation to the stories with different age groups of children at home are practiced. The mothers take the book (gift of the project) home and are given the homework of reading that story to their children every night during the week. Through this practice their reading improves and in many cases the children learn the stories by heart and can later beautifully retell them or answer questions related to the story. The following week they come back and the same process is repeated with a new story book. By the end of the program (three phases of three months) a small library of children's books has been created in each home and the culture of reading and the love for books well established.

New elements that have been added as the project has evolved

One of the new element which has proven very useful is the involvement of students of teacher training colleges. They participate in the sessions initially as observers and, eventually, as active members gaining first-hand experience of the reality of the families of students they will be teaching upon the completion of their studies. Bonds of friendship and trust are developed amongst the Roma and non-Roma as a result of a deeper understanding and knowledge of each other's lives and realities.

The most recent added element has been a program that attempts to promote cooperation between the parents and the kindergarten teachers. Each parent prepares and leads one hour of activities at the kindergarten with the children in a group. The Meséd mothers will use the storytelling, games and handicrafts they learned in Meséd sessions as they lead the activities for the children in the kindergarten. We trust that this will greatly improve the relationships and attitudes of both the teachers towards the Roma parents as well as the parents toward the teachers.

During the course of a Meséd project mothers have the opportunity of exploring new territories or field trips. An example of this is a group that showed interest in touring the college or university facilities, or the other group that visited botanic gardens.

Phases of the project

Phase one: The **reading** of *children's tales*

Time frame: three months

Phase two: While continuing the use of story books, a new element of **writing** is added and the use of drama pedagogy is included.

Time frame: three months

Phase three: **Skills and strategies** in preparation for entering formal school learning.

Time frame: three months

Various subjects, such as pre-natal care, prevention of diseases, nutrition, preparing family budgets and other useful home making subjects are interspersed throughout the project.

According to the needs of the participants guest speakers are invited for this purpose.

Budget structure:

The budget for running a Meséd Group with an average of 15 mothers include the following expenses: Books, facilitator wages, training costs, writing and other materials, small gifts and incentives for children, art and handicraft materials, excursion costs, supervision. A total of 1000 Euro is approximately needed to run one group for nine months through three phases.

Media: There have been several programs on national and local TVs as well as Radio interviews with the facilitators and the participants and sections from the Meséd sessions. To view some of these please visit our webpage at www.eaka.hu

Various news papers and educational publications and periodicals have carried news and articles about the Meséd project.