

OSCE/ ODIHR CONFERENCE  
HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING  
Warsaw, 7 October 2009

EDUCATION AND INTEGRATION OF ROMA MINORS IN ITALIAN  
SCHOOLS

Address by prof. Vinicio Ongini, expert of the DG for Student Affairs, Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research

Mr Chairman/Madam Chair,

I would like to present you the most recent initiatives adopted by the Italian Education Ministry for the integration of Roma and Sinti minors in Italian schools.

Let me reiterate the attention and commitment of the Italian education authorities, at central and local level, towards the education of Roma and Sinti children, in line with the objectives set by OSCE.

**1 FACTS AND FIGURES. “NOMADIC” PUPILS IN ITALIAN SCHOOLS**

The annual Statistics Report by the Italian Education Ministry “Pupils with a non-Italian citizenship” includes a specific section on “nomadic” pupils. This is the definition we normally use to describe in a concise and unambiguous way the status of pupils who are members of Roma and Sinti cultural groups, regardless of whether or not they hold an Italian citizenship.

Foreign and Nomadic Pupils by Region and School Level. School Year 2008/09								
Region	Pre-school		Primary		Lower secondary		Upper secondary	
	Foreign pupils	Nomadic pupils	Foreign pupils	Nomadic pupils	Foreign pupils	Nomadic pupils	Foreign pupils	Nomadic pupils
Piedmont	12.547	204	22.487	668	13.467	358	11.978	5
Valle d'Aosta	282	-	495	-	269	-	230	-
Lombardy	32.385	286	58.267	1.173	32.933	540	28.292	7
Trentino A.A.	3.065	20	4.874	193	2.953	131	2.308	5
Veneto	16.158	146	29.646	651	17.551	348	13.729	12
Friuli V.G.	3.278	23	5.334	109	3.427	42	3.489	-
Liguria	3.346	34	6.346	101	4.299	36	4.782	2
Emilia R.	13.471	142	26.879	537	15.395	317	16.839	22
Tuscany	9.499	177	18.001	413	11.139	257	11.051	18
Umbria	3.012	11	5.227	13	3.186	20	3.299	4
Marche	4.903	14	8.497	50	5.180	34	5.373	2
Lazio	11.094	353	22.186	1.305	14.060	597	14.177	30
Abruzzo	2.083	76	3.946	148	2.524	128	2.152	11
Molise	216	28	453	41	285	32	245	4
Campania	2.237	246	5.317	424	3.317	157	3.339	6
Apulia	2.037	57	4.436	140	2.643	59	2.491	27
Basilicata	285	-	559	2	376	-	392	1
Calabria	1.542	249	3.273	510	2.016	208	1.906	24
Sicily	2.982	63	6.654	340	3.747	109	3.156	6
Sardinia	579	42	1.326	187	893	94	784	9
Italy	125.001	2171	234.203	7005	139.660	3467	130.012	195

Source : Ministry of Education, University and Research

The above figures about “nomadic” pupils refer to the number of pupils who enrolled in different levels and types of public and private schools in school year 2008/09.

Let me point out that the figure about enrolments does not correspond to the number of Roma minors of compulsory school age. It is difficult to draw a clear picture of minors of compulsory school age because local authorities are having difficulties in carrying out a census of Roma and Sinti groups.

**In 2008-2009, 12,838 nomadic pupils** enrolled in schools belonging to the national education system. Overall, nomadic pupils account for 0.14 % of the total number of students who enrolled in schools in the same school year.

#### **Nomadic pupils are mostly concentrated in five regions.**

The regions with the highest number of nomadic pupils enrolled in schools are also the areas where those groups tend to settle down and where the most ancient family groups have been living for more than a century. **Lazio, with 2,225 nomadic pupils** is the region with the highest number of children enrolled, followed by **Lombardy (2,106)**,

**Piedmont (1,235), Veneto (1,157), Emilia Romagna (1,018).** And finally, **Calabria** with just under a thousand students, namely **991**.

#### **Nomadic pupils per school level.**

**2,171 Roma children** enrolled in **pre-schools** and **7,005 pupils** in **primary schools**. These figures confirm a “conservative” attitude of nomadic families vis-à-vis pre-school education: children of that age are usually kept out of school. Notwithstanding the awareness-raising efforts of associations, through cultural mediators and specialized workers, nomadic communities do not show a consistent attitude towards compulsory schooling. The main cause for such difficulty is due to the deep-rooted diffidence towards the *gadjé* (the “non-Roma people”), but there are also cultural reasons and self-interest, since, in some cases, children can be a source of income for their families (petty pilfering and begging).

The number of enrolments drops sharply in **lower secondary schools, with 3,467 students**, and all the more in **upper secondary schools, with 195 nomadic students enrolled**.

## **2 THE PRINCIPLES AND THE NATIONAL REGULATORY FRAMEWORK**

**The first systematic approach to schooling for Roma and Sinti children was launched in 1965**, following an operational agreement for **the establishment of special classes “Lacio Drom” (“Pleasant Journey”)** signed the same year by the Italian Education Ministry, the Institute of Pedagogy of the University of Padoa and the *Opera Nomadi*. The methodological choice of setting up special classes was justified on the grounds that this was the first approach to school for a population which had no previous experience of schooling: a special school, by its own nature, allowed to adapt the school calendar and timetable to the needs of nomadic life.

**In 1982**, a new agreement with the *Opera Nomadi* established that Roma children of compulsory school age should attend **mainstream Italian classes**, with an additional teacher to every six Roma students acting as a link between the school and the families. In more recent years, the general principles and the regulatory framework for the integration of children from different cultural backgrounds, including Roma minors, are laid down in the following two documents.

- Ministerial Memorandum *no. 24 “Guidelines for the Reception and the Integration of Foreign Students”*, 1 March 2006, and

- **“The Italian Way to Intercultural Education and the Integration of Foreign Students”** by the National Observatory on the Integration of Foreign Students and Intercultural Education, Education Ministry, October 2007. This document, of a more general nature, describes the principles and the actions at the basis of the national “model” for the reception and the integration of minors from different cultural backgrounds, including Roma and Sinti students.

The general principles illustrated in the document are:

*1 Universalism* i.e. recognising the rights of minors on the basis of the provisions set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989, and ratified by Italy in 1991;

*2 A common school*, i.e. integrating foreign students and students from different cultural backgrounds in mainstream classes;

*3 The centrality of each individual*, i.e. recognising the value of each individual with his/her unique biography;

*4 Interculture*, i.e. promoting dialogue and exchange between cultures for all students at all levels.

The above document also points out the need to promote actions against prejudice and discrimination: “anti-Ziganism (hostility towards Roma) can be a specific form of racism that intercultural education must fight by promoting a greater understanding of the history of the Roma and Sinti populations”.

### **3 BEST PRACTICES: SOME EXAMPLES**

There are many examples of successful school integration of Roma minors thanks to the joint effort of schools, Roma associations, Local authorities and Universities, including initiatives carried out within the framework of European programmes. The following examples describe initiatives carried out by different stakeholders using different “languages” and methodologies.

#### **1 The INSETRom Programme. A European project on training teachers and engaging Roma families**

This Project is coordinated by the University of Turin, in cooperation with the NGO Cospe and involves teachers from Piedmont and Tuscany. The Project, which is part of a EU Programme, was launched in December 2007 and will end in November 2009. The goal of the project is to understand what the non-Roma population perceive as a

persistently diffident attitude towards schooling and to define a teacher training model which pays special attention to the involvement of Roma families.

## **2 Action for the integration of Roma/Sinti/Travellers students in the Veneto Region. Training Teachers and School Principals and involving Local Authorities.**

This Programme was promoted and coordinated by the Veneto Regional Education Office in cooperation with the *Opera Nomadi*, local authorities and other Roma associations.

The aim is to develop specific skills and raise awareness among teachers and school principals. The training programme will be carried out in all the provinces of the Veneto Region from October 2009 to February 2010.

## **3 *Diklem tu* Project (I see you) – City of Turin**

### **Integration through new technologies and the language of art**

The project is part of a European programme promoted by the FIERI Foundation. This initiative involves a network of schools in Turin and aims to facilitate the integration of Roma students in schools through the use of new technologies, computer literacy and art. It is partly funded by the private Foundation *Compagnia di San Paolo* and was launched in March 2009.

## **4 Training project for Roma and Sinti cultural mediators and teachers with expertise as language facilitators – Province of Milan**

This is a multi-year training project for women belonging to the Roma and Sinti communities employed as cultural and language mediators in pre-primary and primary schools. The project is coordinated by the Provincial Education Office in cooperation with the Lombardy Region, the City of Milan, the *Casa della carità* of the Diocese of Milan and the *Opera Nomadi* in Milan. Twenty-three Roma and Sinti women mediators are currently employed, while fourteen “language-facilitating” teachers are seconded in schools with a high number of Roma students (1 language facilitator to every 22 students in a school), out of a total of 100 language facilitators for foreign students employed in the province of Milan.

In 2009, a multi-language guide for the inclusion of Roma minors called *Tutti a scuola*, was published by the Lombardy Region with the aim of helping families to understand how schools work, why education is important and the rights and duties involved.

## **5 Integration of Roma and Sinti minors in schools through sports – City of Palermo**

This programme of activities is promoted by the association ARCI SICILIA. The aim is to create a Sports association for Roma children, mostly children who dropped out of school. The sports association “ASD Amalipe” includes both Roma and Italian children and its team has entered the league championship of the local Italian Football Federation in the province of Palermo for the third year running.

The Italian Education Ministry intends to keep an open dialogue with the Roma and Sinti Associations, the NGOs and, of course, the other EU Member States, the OSCE and the other International Organisations.

**Note**

From the 60s to present day, the Italian Education Ministry has signed cooperation agreements on school integration with Sector Associations. The present approach adopted by the Ministry is to involve the greatest possible number of active stakeholders and sign agreements with a wide range of partners. To this aim, the Ministry has launched a series of formal meetings with the “**Opera Nomadi**”, the “**Associazione Italiana Zingari Oggi**” and the “**Federazione Rom e Sinti insieme**”.

In addition to this, the Memorandum of Understanding with the *Opera Nomadi* was confirmed and updated last 24 April 2009.