

# The Council of Europe's Romani–Plurilingual Policy Experimentation

## Plurilingual education in action

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# Overview

- Plurilingualism and plurilingual education
- The Council of Europe, Roma and Romani
- New policy guidelines on the educational inclusion of Roma (2018–2019)
- The policy experimentation (2022–2025)
- Four examples from the classroom
- Conclusion

# Plurilingualism and plurilingual education

# Plurilingualism

- The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR 1.3) defines “plurilingualism” as “a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact”
- This concept entails that new languages take root in the soil provided by the languages that are already present in the mind of the learner; and because languages “interrelate and interact”, an integrated plurilingual repertoire is always greater than the sum of its parts
- If the aim of language education is to develop integrated plurilingual repertoires (CEFR 1.3)
  - we must find ways of enabling learners to make use of the languages they already know when they are learning a new language
  - when educating members of linguistic minorities, we must ensure that their home languages play a central role in their educational experience

# The paradigm case of Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní)

- A primary school for girls situated in one of Dublin's western suburbs
- 2014/2015: 320 pupils; 80% from immigrant families, most of them with little or no English before starting school; more than 50 home languages
- In response to such linguistic diversity, the school
  - accepted that each pupil's home language was her primary cognitive tool, the medium of her consciousness and her agency
  - encouraged pupils to use their home languages for whatever purposes seemed to them appropriate
  - sought ways of including home languages in every lesson
- Immigrant and native Irish pupils achieved high levels of
  - engagement and motivation to learn
  - language awareness
  - proficiency in Irish
  - age-appropriate literacy in English, Irish, French (grades 5 and 6), and home languages

(Little & Kirwan 2019)

# Why was Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní) so successful?

- By including every home language, in principle in every lesson, the school created an environment in which each pupil knew she was welcome, accepted, included in her full identity: the classroom became a space of empowerment
- Once you include a pupil's home language, you open the door to their experience ("action knowledge"; Barnes 1976), and this sparks their intrinsic motivation
- By inviting each pupil to use her home language in the classroom, drawing on it as a resource to be shared, you recognize the unique contribution she can make to classroom discourse and the learning of the class as a whole – and in doing this you grant her autonomy
- The inevitability of this autonomy stimulates pupils to devise their own autonomous language learning projects, collaborative as well as individual
- Because their linguistic autonomy fuels their learning, pupils develop high levels of self-esteem, self-confidence and agency

The Council of Europe, Roma and Romani

# Council of Europe: core values and educational policy

- Established in 1949 to defend human rights, parliamentary democracy and the rule of law: European Convention on Human Rights
- Key part of mission: to promote awareness of a European identity based on shared values
- Attaches great importance to language learning as a means of
  - preserving linguistic and cultural identity
  - facilitating communication and fostering understanding
  - combating intolerance and xenophobia
- *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* published in 2001 and *Companion Volume* in 2020
- CEFR: culmination of three decades' work on language learning and teaching for communication and exchange
- Developed to support Council of Europe principles and policy
- Focuses on the language user/learner as an autonomous social agent: uses “can do” descriptors to define language proficiency in terms of language use

# Council of Europe, Roma and Romani

## Policy

- Council of Europe committed to the educational inclusion of Roma children and young people for more than 50 years
- Recommendation R (2000) 4: “an urgent need to build new foundations for future educational strategies towards the Roma/Gypsy people in Europe”
- Recommendation R (2012) 13: quality education “gives access to learning to all pupils, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups”
- *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (2008): integration as a reciprocal, two-way process with gains on both sides

## Practical measures

- *Curriculum Framework for Romani* (2008), versions of the European Language Portfolio for learners aged 6–11 and 11–16, handbook for teachers ([www.coe.int/lang](http://www.coe.int/lang) → Plurilingual education → Romani)
- QualiRom project (2010–2013), funded by EU and hosted by ECML, developed teaching/learning materials in six Romani varieties ([www.ecml.at](http://www.ecml.at) → Resources)
- QualiRom Training and Consultancy (ECML, 2016–2024) advised ECML member states on
  - use of CFR, ELPs and QualiRom materials
  - educational inclusion of Roma children and young people following the principles of plurilingual and intercultural education

# New policy guidelines on the educational inclusion of Roma (2018–2019)

# Why a new policy document?

- Despite the Council of Europe's decades-long engagement with Roma issues, the educational inclusion of Roma children and young people continues to present major challenges to member states
- Successive Council of Europe Recommendations are clear about the principles that should shape policy (human rights) and the outcomes that policy implementation should achieve (social cohesion)
- But they have little to say about those aspects of policy that shape classroom practice
- Inspired by the example of Scoil Bhríde (Cailíní), the new document seeks to fill the gap between high-level policy aspirations and practical tools like the *Curriculum Framework for Romani* and the QualiRom teaching materials

# The educational inclusion of Roma: five principles

1. The educational inclusion of Roma is a fundamental human right
2. The educational inclusion of Roma should also benefit non-Roma students
3. The highly variable linguistic profiles of Roma communities mean that there can be no single approach to the educational inclusion of Roma: flexibility is essential

# The Roma, Romani and the language of schooling

- Linguistically, Roma communities fall into three broad categories:
  - those that have lost the Romani variety spoken by earlier generations
  - those in which older members of the community still use Romani on a daily basis, whereas children and young people hear and understand Romani but choose not to use it in their daily lives
  - those that have retained a variety of Romani as their domestic and community language
- Whatever their relation to the Romani language, Roma children fall into three broad categories as regards the language of schooling:
  - those for whom the language of schooling presents no difficulties
  - those who speak a non-standard variety of the dominant language and thus need help to become proficient in the (standard) language of schooling
  - those who lack proficiency in the language of schooling because they speak Romani at home and/or are recent immigrants

# The educational inclusion of Roma: five principles

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2. The educational inclusion of Roma should also benefit non-Roma students
3. The highly variable linguistic profiles of Roma communities mean that there can be no single approach to the educational inclusion of Roma: flexibility is essential
4. Flexibility is more likely to be achieved when the primary focus is on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching
5. Flexibility is also more likely to be achieved when language education focuses on the development of plurilingual repertoires

# The policy experimentation (2022–2025)

## Flexibility demands a learner-centred pedagogy

- Children do not come to school as empty vessels
- They bring with them a complex of experience, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs
  - “action knowledge”: “that view of the world on which our actions are based” (Barnes 1976)
- The pedagogical goal: to enable learners to convert “school knowledge” (curriculum content) into “action knowledge”
- The pedagogical challenge: to find ways of bringing learners’ existing action knowledge into fruitful contact with whatever it is they are supposed to be learning

## Learner-centredness: the plurilingual challenge

- When children start school, their sense of self is shaped by their “action knowledge”
- Children from linguistic minorities and immigrant families have acquired their “action knowledge” in a language other than the language of schooling
- Their home language is central to their identity, but also the default medium of their discursive thinking and thus an essential support for learning
- Bringing their action knowledge into fruitful contact with the language of schooling means bringing their home language into the classroom and ensuring that it is the soil in which their proficiency in the language of schooling grows

## The RPPE's foundational assumption

- The inclusion of Roma pupils will be greatly facilitated if their action knowledge is fully engaged
- That means bringing Romani language and culture into the classroom and (in mainstream schools) sharing it with non-Roma pupils
- The expectation is that this will motivate Roma pupils, fostering their self-esteem and developing their capacity to behave autonomously as learners
- In mainstream classrooms it should also promote social cohesion

# Participating countries and schools

## Three countries and ten schools

- **Greece (115,000+ Roma)**
  - Amaliada: 120 pupils, 95% Roma who speak Romani at home but have some Greek when they start school
  - Komotini: 170 pupils, all Turkish-speaking Roma, no contact with Greek outside school
  - Volos: 300 pupils, most of them Roma who speak Romani at home
- **Slovakia (400,000+ Roma)**
  - Košice: 900 pupils, 100% Roma, about 40% come to school with some proficiency in Slovak
  - Šulekovo-Hlohovec: 180 pupils, 40% Roma most of whom speak Slovak at home and are relatively well integrated
  - Vyškovce nad Ipľom: 23 pupils, 25% Roma who speak Romani at home and must learn Slovak as language of schooling
- **Slovenia (10,000+ Roma)**
  - Črenšovci: 205 pupils, 27 Roma who speak Romani at home and must learn Slovenian at school
  - Leskovec: 736 pupils, 101 Roma who speak Romani at home and must learn Slovenian at school
  - Maribor: 505 pupils; 47 Roma, not all of whom speak Romani at home
  - Škocjan: 400 pupils; about 80 Roma who speak Romani at home

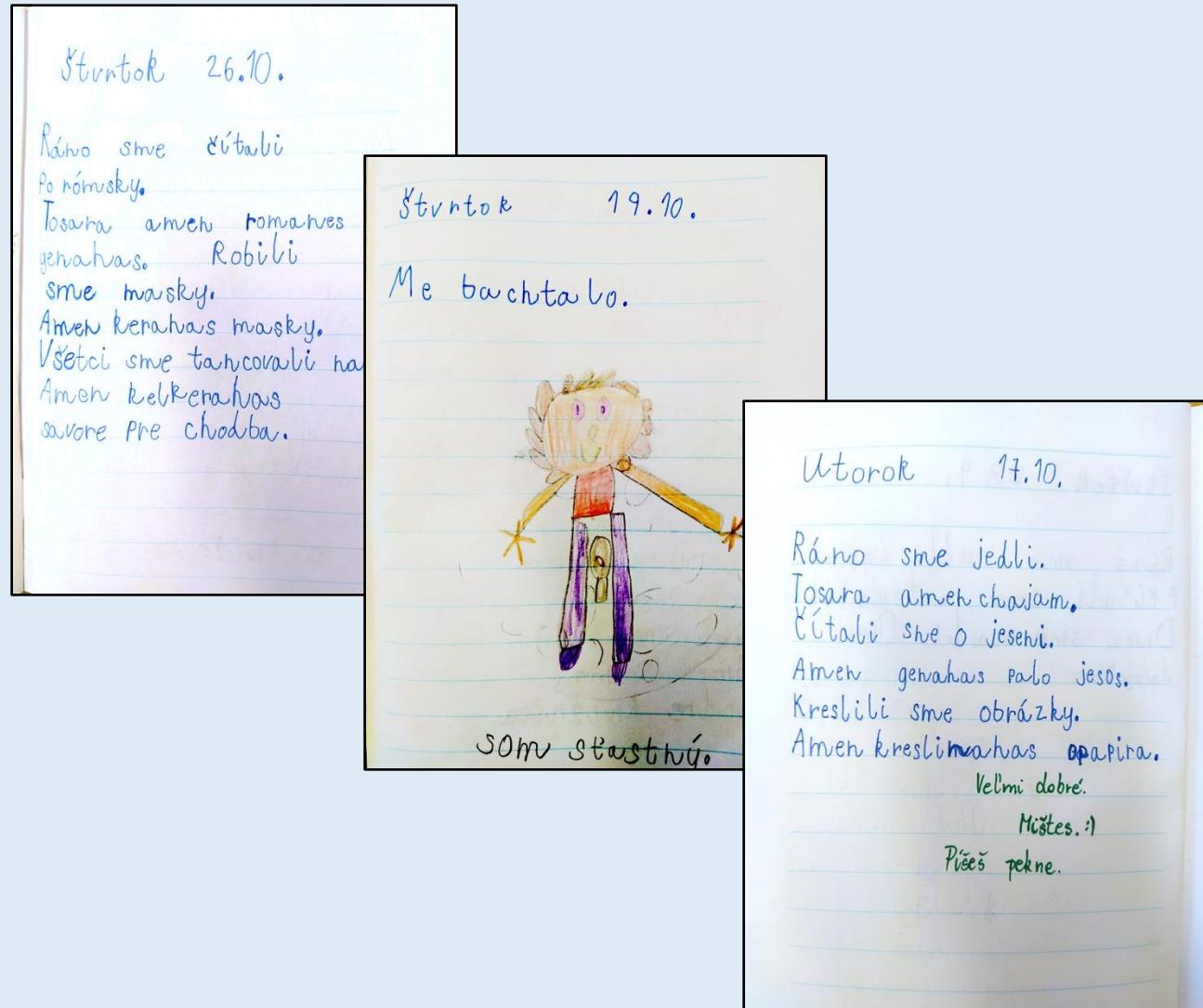
## Three categories of school

1. Schools that cater entirely or overwhelmingly for Roma pupils who live in settlements and speak a variety of Romani at home (three schools in Greece, one in Slovakia)
2. Schools in which Roma pupils are in the minority, live in settlements and mostly speak a variety of Romani at home (one school in Slovakia, three in Slovenia)
3. Schools whose Roma pupils do not live in settlements and in many cases do not speak Romani at home (one school in Slovakia, one in Slovenia)

# Four examples from the classroom

# Example 1 – Košice (category 1 school)

- Romani language used to draw youngest pupils into Slovak as language of schooling: familiar Romani fairy tales narrated by a Roma classroom assistant captured their interest, which was sustained as they recycled the fairy tale in Slovak
- In the same school, the teachers participating in the RPPE used simple learner logbooks to support the development of basic literacy in Romani as well as Slovak



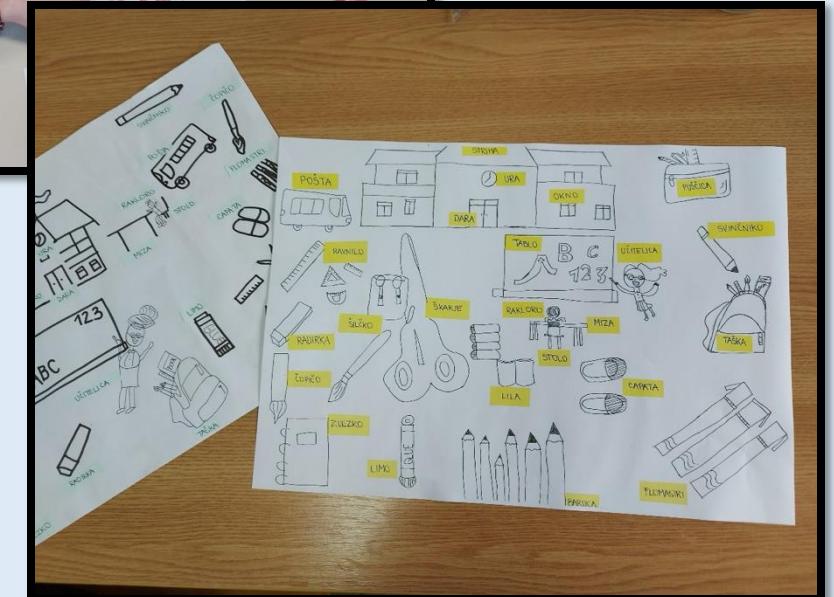
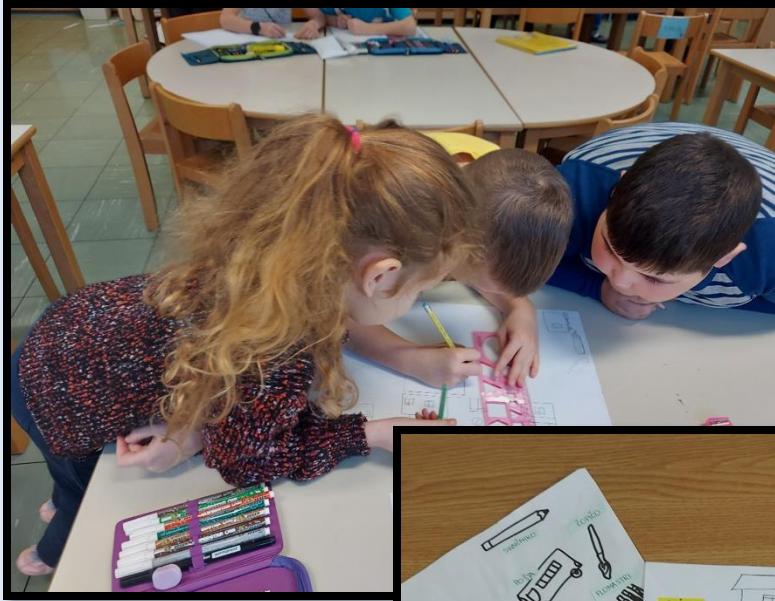
## Example 2 – Leskovec (category 2 school)

- A grade 4 teacher asked three Roma girls in his class to teach him the Romani words for familiar classroom actions and objects
- He said that what he really needed was a small bilingual glossary
- The next morning a glossary was waiting for him on his desk
- He then launched a project with the four Roma girls and the Roma classroom assistant to create a more extensive classroom glossary
- It took four weeks to complete and was then printed in colour and distributed for use throughout the school



## Example 3 – Škocjan (category 2 school)

- A grade 2 teacher had her pupils create colouring books in which they drew everyday classroom items, labelling the drawings in English and Romani
- Only four of the 17 pupils in the class were Roma
- While the Roma practised writing words and phrases in their home language, the non-Roma pupils had the experience of learning a little Romani



## Example 4 – Šulekovo (category 3 school)

- Multilingual lessons in which pupils worked in groups on the same task in Slovak, English, German and Romani
  - The Romani groups included at least one pupil who spoke Romani, and it was her task to teach her Roma peers how to perform the task in Romani
- The school organized an afternoon workshop on Romani culture and history which was taken by Roma and non-Roma pupils together
  - The fact that their non-Roma peers found Romani culture and history interesting could only boost the self-esteem of Roma pupils



# Conclusion

After three years of implementation, the RPPE has shown that

- The inclusion of Romani language and culture in the everyday life of schools and classrooms impacts positively on the motivation and engagement of Roma students
- In mainstream schools, it also arouses the interest of non-Roma students and helps to foster social cohesion
- When Roma children are not proficient in Romani, the inclusion of the language in their educational experience helps to reconnect them with an important part of their heritage
- In Roma-only schools where students speak a variety of Romani at home, the language provides an essential bridge into the language of schooling
- By including written forms of the language, schools and classrooms acknowledge that Romani is a language like any other – this message is reinforced when other home languages are also present and included in the same way as Romani
- When schools engage in bi- and multilingual projects that require translation between the language of schooling, curriculum languages, Romani and other home languages, they provide all students with an experience of plurilingualism whose cognitive, cultural and social value cannot be overestimated

To find out more about the RPPE

[www.coe.int/lang](http://www.coe.int/lang) → Plurilingual education → Romani