Roma Mentor Project: The Roma Intellectual Friend Model

Péter Bogdán*

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Abstract:
Introduction: The Roma Mentor Project has originally been the experimental educational model of Open Society Institute for multiply disadvantaged Roma and non-Roma youth in the period 2006-2013. Following the closure of OSI’s experimental and alternative educational projects, it has been run further, during the 2016/17 academic year, with the support of the Norway Grant, by the Bhim Rao Association (located in Northern Hungary).

Purpose: The Roma Mentor Project aims to establish the pedagogical model of the intellectual Roma friend in order to effectively overcome the sociocultural disadvantages of the Roma and non-Roma children with multiply disadvantages.

Methods: Throughout the program a Roma mentor may be a Roma intellectual, artist or well-known figure from the media, whose primary goal is to act as a role model for the Roma children through presenting their own personal and professional life, as well as to become a friend of the mentored.

Conclusions: A mentor from Roma origins appears during the project as a Roma intellectual friend in multiply disadvantaged Roma and non-Roma children’s lives, which is especially true considering that the Roma mentor draws tools of socialization from Roma culture.

Key words: Roma, education, pedagogy, innovation, mentor.

Introduction
The Roma Mentor Project has originally been the Open Society Institute’s experimental and alternative educational model in Budapest for Roma and non-Roma disadvantaged children. Its primary aim has been the diminishing of prejudice towards Roma communities (through developing narratives about Roma culture at school) and to shape and strengthen Roma children’s identity.

* Péter Bogdán, educational researcher, Hungary; bogdan.peter1979@gamil.com
The Roma Mentor Project has been launched by Open Society Institute and coordinated by the Pressley Ridge Hungary Foundation in the 2006/07 academic year, at this time exclusively in Hungary. In the 2007/08 academic year as well the Roma Mentor Project has been implemented by the Pressley Ridge Hungary Foundation again, somewhat orienting towards international locations too (Macedonia, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic). Eventually, in Hungary, the project has been coordinated by the Bhim Rao Association (located in Northern Hungary) from the 2008/09 academic year on, while the Pressley Ridge Hungary Foundation has been handling the RMP internationally. In the 2009/10 academic year – due to lack of financial resources – the Roma Mentor Project has not been operating. In academic years 2010/11, 2011/12 and 2012/13, the Bhim Rao Association has also been a coordinator, followed by the termination of resources by Open Society Institute.

In the 2006/07 academic year, the project operated at 21 locations altogether (19 of which were educational facilities, while 2 of them were non-profit organizations). While there are no available data about the 2007/08 academic year, it is certain that from the 2007/08 academic year, Open Society Institute has only been able to finance 10 locations as part of the experimental project. After a one-year-long hiatus, in 2010/11 as well as the 2011/12 academic year there were 15 RMP locations, while in the 2012/13 academic year there were 12 locations.

Following a three-year-long pause, the program has been re-launched in the 2016/17 academic year, this time with the support of the Norway Grant, focusing exclusively on Hungary, but after that, as the national and international fundings ran out, the financing opportunities became more limited, that is, the Roma Mentor Project ceased to exist as an extracurricular program.

1 Literature review

The author of this paper is in a special position as there is no existing international literature about the Roma Mentor Project in English (with the exception of one handbook published by Open Society Foundations in English) – the scholarly publications about this topic are almost exclusively written in Hungarian. These are on the one hand Open Society Foundations’ publications (Roma Mentor Project – Mentor Database, 2008; Gáspár, Gruber, Kubicskó, Liddle, & Rózsa, 2011) and on the other hand, the author's own publications and

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2 The Roma Mentor Project has come to realization from the 2008/09 academic year in Romania, while the Czech Republic has joined in 2011/12.
those of written with his colleagues (Bogdán, 2009; Bogdán, 2012; Mészáros, Bogdán, & Csereklye, 2012; Bogdán, & Némethné Végh, 2016).

Open Society Foundations’ 2008 Roma Mentor Database contains Roma mentors’ professional biographies, including photographs, who were nominated in 2008 for invitations to act as mentors for an academic year or as a guest mentor for a few occasions. Open Society Foundations’ 2011 Training Handbook reports about the ideal circumstances and methodological background the Roma Mentor Project operates in general.

Firstly, the previous publications of this author provide a thorough overview of the Program’s primary principles, main aims and methods of implementation and the role of Roma mentors and non-Roma coordinators’ (teachers) role. Secondly, the author discovers the RMP-characters and types that were formed between 2006 and 2013 in terms of the Roma mentors’ professional background and areas of interest. Thirdly, they aim to illustrate the author’s cooperation in a Northern Hungarian school with his coordinator, Judit Némethné Végh, and their inter- and multicultural pedagogical concept that have for three years compensated for the students’ pedagogical, sociological and sociocultural disadvantages, complemented by a half-year experience in the capital city, Budapest, as a substitute Roma mentor.

Due to the lack of relevant scholarly literature, publication of valuable research and information about the Roma Mentor Project is feasible only in case the author collaborates with the implementers (Open Society Institute, Pressley Ridge Hungary Foundation, Bhim Rao Association) in order to get access to relevant annual documentation that serve as basis for outlining the Roma Mentor Project’s most significant pedagogical features and content.

2 Methodology

As highlighted above, documentation from all existing Hungarian RMP-locations is necessary (pedagogical missions, pedagogical aim, pedagogical content, learning content, annual activity planning, visual and written activity process documentation, mid-annual and annual professional reports, training descriptions, promotional issues, information regarding Roma mentors’ qualifications and professional areas of interest, Likert-scale attitude observation documentations) to draw pedagogical-educational conclusions, based on which qualitative (content- and document based analysis) as well as quantitative (data-based) analysis can be applied. It is essential to note that Likert-scale attitude observation tests have been applied on students in the period between 2006 and 2013 (at the beginning and end of the year) that occasionally produced spectacular quantitative results, while another times the results were not comprehensive due to lack of data.
Mainly for the latter reason (lack of data) and considering that Likert-scale attitude tests have not been applied in the academic year 2016/17 (primarily because of the partial conceptual change in the Roma Mentor Project), for the sake of unified analysis, this paper does not apply quantitative analysis, rather focuses on qualitative (content- and document-based) analysis as it is applicable to all academic years. As the author of this article has already analyzed the period between 2006 and 2013 in previous publications, the present study does not focus on this period, rather the 2016/17 academic year. The study presents this RMP version and thoroughly analyzes it as the most current version of the Project.

3 Roma Mentor Project
In the majority of cases, the program focused on primary school students, occasionally including high school students too.
The main aim of the Roma Mentor Project is to support Roma children in developing their self-understanding and confidence and to broaden their awareness and knowledge about Roma culture. Besides, its primary goal is to offer opportunities for Roma children to meet well-known Roma figures who have succeeded in their lives and whose personal way of live, academic background or professional career may be beneficial and exemplary for the children.
The Roma Mentor Project connects Roma intellectuals, professionals and artists who have flourished in their own life trajectories and who focus on Roma culture during the after-school sessions with – in most of the cases – Roma children.
During these sessions, the Roma mentors help Roma children with their expertise and share their life experiences with them, socialize them and actively aim at diminishing the socio-cultural boundaries and disadvantages of Roma children.
The programs take place 16 times throughout the academic year. In average, Roma mentors meet the mentored students once in a fortnight (in an interval of 2-4 hours, although there are opportunities for multiple-day excursions or camps).
Within the Roma Mentor Project’s framework, the Roma Mentor Database contains the professional CV and photograph of well-known Roma public figures who offered to act as guest mentors to enrich and diversify the annual program provided by the permanent Roma mentor at the given RMP location.
Until now, such well-known public figures have decided to be guest mentors as Laura Baranyi, editor and reporter at Radio C; Csaba Báder, president of RomNet Media Foundation; György Makula, former spokesperson of the Hungarian National Police Headquarters; Henrik Kállai art- and cultural
manager; Ferenc KunhEGyesi artist or Sándor Radics psycho-pedagogue, public education expert.

In general, based on the Roma mentors’ qualifications and their areas of interest in Roma culture, 3 types of RMP programs can be identified in the period 2006-2013³: “1. Activities focusing on strengthening Roma identity and lifestyle advising; 2. Programs targeting on strengthening Roma identity almost exclusively; 3. Sessions with core attention paid to self-knowledge and skills development.

Within the framework of the first category, Roma mentors serving as role models have held activities where mentored Roma children could get familiar with Roma history, fine arts, gastronomy, folk dance, language, the advantages of studying and the educational system, the relationship of Roma people with police, law-abiding behavior and various types of discrimination and prejudice.

In terms of the second category, special emphasis was put on Roma history, literature, religious life, mythology and folklore. As part of the third category, children were given a chance to come to know numerous arts techniques, skills-and practice-based development, self-identification and orientating in the legal world, as well as getting to know to societal processes (Bogdán, 2012)”

Open Society Institute’s program has changed significantly in its content: from the academic year 2010/11 on, more emphasis has been paid on the involvement of non-Roma disadvantaged students besides the consolidation of Roma students’ identity. Thus, the Roma Mentor Project has moved towards the management of inter-ethnic relations and the application of multi-and intercultural toolbox.

The latter program component has remained significant in the 2016/17 academic year – financed by the Norway Grants – with one main distinction compared to the previous versions of the project. Hereby the Bhim Rao Association – having the absolute freedom in constructing the program - decided to pay special attention to the third RMP-type outlined above. Therefore, the Association invited Roma artists (fine arts, actors and musicians) exclusively as Roma mentors, so that non-Roma students could also get familiar primarily with the artistic areas of Roma culture and ethnography.

10 RMP locations received financial support in the 2016/17 academic year, focusing on the age group 10-14 exclusively – although this criteria has been handled quite flexibly, in case of divergences the Roma mentors and non-Roma pedagogue coordinator were not held against.

With regard to the 2016/17 academic year, when the project was managed single-handedly by the Bhim Rao Association, three RMP-types can be identified as well: 1. Performing arts, 2. Filmmaking, 3. Fine arts (Bogdán, 2013)

³ In Macedonia has also been developed type 4: type of field exploration.
Out of the 10 RMP locations, four have been heavily involved with performing arts, one with filmmaking while five were focusing on fine arts. An interesting motive of the RMP programs focusing on performing arts is the feature that two subgroups have been busy with musical performance while two other subgroups focused on acting.

In each group, Roma mentors have been working with project-based methodology as besides the cognitive- and skills-based development, a final artistic product (play, musical piece of art, fine arts exhibition) has also been central to the 16 sessions so that they could later (as the closure of the program) be presented for the local audience (parents, pedagogues, classmates) at each of the RMP locations and those interested in the RMP project in the capital city.

3.1 Performing arts

In 2016/17, the performing arts division of the RMP has been represented by György Lakatos, leader of the authentic Roma music group ‘Romano Glaso’; Zsolt Farkas Roma dance teacher and leader of the authentic Roma music group ‘Khamoro’; as well as Dávid Csányi and Kristóf Horváth actors.

1. Musical subgroup

György Lakatos’ sessions taking place in Biharkeresztes have included playful contests about Roma ethnography (Roma history, traditions, habits), besides learning about Roma folk dance, folk music, contemporary dance, pop- and child songs. The primary goal of the sessions was learning by heart and presenting a Holocaust dance ballad (“The girl who danced ‘til death”), memorizing songs and poems, thereby developing reading and comprehension skills, musical abilities, basic movement and dance skills, social and self-understanding competencies. The program has included activities that aimed at providing knowledge and raising awareness about Hungary and the European Union in the form of playful contests. Memorizing songs and getting familiar with traditions, customs in Christmas time has also been part of the program.

2. Musical subgroup

At the sessions held by Zsolt Farkas in Nógrádmegyer, traditional Roma dances and songs have been in the center, as well as developing basic motion and dance skills and practicing playing musical instruments. The main aim of the subgroup has been to produce a stage-play until the closure of the program – with the mentor’s help – that includes Roma dances and music as its foundation. During the sessions, children could learn about rhythm instruments, the esztam beat, the use of kettles, wooden spoons, rattles, drums, claps, the single and

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4 The presentation of RMP activities is based on the Roma mentors’ annual plans.
partner dances, the basic steps of Roma dances, the Gypsy csárdás dance, the Balkan and Egyptian belly dance, the Gypsy dance from Szatmár (single and partner dance versions), the “botoló” Gypsy csárdás dance, as well as about famous Gypsy musicians and dancers. Above all this, students were encouraged to practice elocution, played jaw-breakers and tongue-twisters, do basic motion moves and practice the choreography of the dance-musical play.

3. Acting subgroup
The main goal of Dávid Csányi’s sessions in Mátraverebély has been to create a stage play by the end of the project that can provide mentored students an insight into the theatrical world besides developing their collaborative, cooperation and communication skills, as well as their self-awareness and self-confidence. Speaking techniques, theatrical movement skills and memory development practices were all part of Dávid Csányi’s occasions besides the rhythm drills, improvisation exercises, dubbing and playing. Also, the sessions provided knowledge about Roma authors’ and poets’ work, Roma history, Gypsy language idiosyncrasies and Roma habits and customs. Within the framework of the program a Santa Claus and Christmas ceremony also took place.

4. Acting subgroup
During Kristóf Horváth’s sessions in Jászkísér, the superhero existing in the children’s mind was built upon through poetic and acting elements. As Kristóf Horváth is a slam poetry champion, the children got to learn improvisation techniques. An advantage of this technique is that it provides self-confidence to mentored students so that they are able to react quicker than average in everyday situations and to invoke changes in their direct environment. The main goal of the mentor was to establish and train attentiveness and body awareness, the development of active vocabulary, the training of imagination and tools of self-expression (speaking, movement) besides deploying writing skills, poetic analysis and general literacy. The main goal that was set for the project was an improvisatory play for students to perform by the closure of the program.

3.2 Filmmakings
There were two mentors at the RMP-location in Sajókaza: Máté Balogh and Anikó Kenéz. This group of children was busy learning the basics of filmmaking. The latter served as the main goal of the local program, at the end of which children have created a short film and a werkfilm about the making of the original short film.

5 The presentation of RMP activities is based on the Roma mentors’ annual plans.
Mentored students had the chance to develop their collaboration and self-expressions skills in shooting a film and learnt about key figures in Roma culture, Roma myths, dramaturgical foundations of storytelling and the basic practices in filmmaking. Activities involved movies about well-known Roma figures, script-writing, interview-making. Children also rehearsed movie scenes and then participated in the shooting, editing and cutting stages of filmmaking.

3.3 Fine arts

In 2016/17, the fine arts section of RMP was represented by András Kállai sculptor, Henrik Kállai artist, Klára Lakatos artist, János Amígó Bogdán artist and Ferenc Kunhegyesi artist.

Group 1
András Kállai Roma mentor was mainly active in getting students familiar with fine arts, Roma culture and identity through the application of fine art techniques in Nagyrábe. His main goal was to develop students’ visual and manual skills, open communication and networking abilities, with a special focus on social sensitivity and tolerance. In practical terms, the mentor primarily focused on Roma-Hungarian common culture and history with mentored children. The activities involved leisure time programs (garden grill parties, barbecuing), discussions about identity, Roma culture, Henna-painting, landscape-art, pastel drawing, action painting, abstract painting, photo montage formation (in the topic of environment, media, tolerance, human, love, friendship), portraying, statuette, creation of clay sculptures about traditional Roma professions, crayon drawings about Roma participation in the Hungarian Revolution of 1848/49 and fresco-painting. The children participated at a Christmas party and in the creation of a Carnival mask. The main goal of András Kállai Roma mentor was to successfully set up an exhibition by the end of the program.

Group 2
Feren Kunhegyesi Roma mentor was active in Szendrőlád, where mentored students got to know poetry, prose, music, dance and numerous other alternative forms of self-expression. He applied techniques of drama-based pedagogy or theatre-pedagogy in order to develop students’ self-expression, creativity and imagination, as well as to strengthen their aptitude to literature. At the same time, they created sceneries and costumes, got familiar with brush-work and color application discovering the diversity of self-expression. Roma myths, tales of origins and fables were also part of the discussions.

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6 The presentation of RMP activities is based on the Roma mentors’ annual plans.
The activities that took place in Szendrőlád all involved elements of drama-based pedagogy. One of the most significant parts of the program was the students’ visit to the National Theatre in Miskolc, where children had the opportunity to talk to the director, actors, scenery designer and technicians. The analyzed subgroup is referred to as part of the “fine arts” even though the RMP located in Szendrőlád closed the project with a stage play. The labelling has been justified by various activities that involved features of fine arts, as well as due to the fact that Ferenc Kunhegyesi is a well-known artist in Hungary. The scenery of the stage play was also designed and painted by the children together with the mentor, which provides an example of such activities.

Group 3
János Amígó Bogdán Roma mentor applied techniques of fine arts in Kerecsend to develop children’s communication skills, way of thinking and creativity, as well as their ability to work independently, cooperatively and collaboratively. The mentor provided a chance for children to learn about the theoretical and practical background of fine arts. He focused on basic concepts of fine arts, attitudes and way of thinking, as well as use of tools. The Roma mentor trained the children in visual language, self-expression skills and the basics of using materials. The main goal of the program was the construction of an art performance involving various areas of arts and the performance itself in the form of an exhibition as the closure of the project. Throughout the sessions, students participated in patchwork workshops, drawing and brushwork activities in a topic by their decision, introduction to the “tree” as the main attraction of the performance, voice recordings for the performance with a guest mentor, as well as the planning of the exhibition.

Group 4
Henrik Kállai Roma mentor in Lucfalva developed children’s creativity using fine arts techniques. He focused on highlighting and synthetizing, as well as developing basic ways of thinking through abstract concepts. For this, he taught students how to use mixed forms and alternatives of painting and graphical techniques, the application of compositional tools, forms and proper coloring techniques. Another focus of his activities was to get students familiar with fine arts concepts, the history of wall-painting, Roma fine arts and traditional Roma types of decoration. The main goal of the program was to produce a fresco at the RMP location. Activities involved stain painting, wallpaper glue painting, imprint painting, claying, embossment, Henna-painting, monotypes, glass painting, texturing, montaging, collaging, pastel use, tempera use, installations about traditional Gypsy lifestyle, wall painting, brushwork and liquation.
In terms of Roma folklore, mentored students got familiar with Gypsy fine arts, work of Roma sculptors, Roma family values, family presentation of Roma painters and Roma myths, tales of origin.

Group 5
Klára Lakatos Roma mentor in Ároktő advanced students’ aesthetic conscience and artistic skills, but her goals included establishing the basis of communication, trust and networking skills. Besides, the Roma mentor aimed at acquiring self-discipline competencies (success and failure management, persistency, responsibility and tolerance towards others).

With regard to Roma values, the mentor aimed at strengthening children’s Roma identity through analysis of Roma culture, but also paid special attention to tolerance and values of diversity. In terms of the latter, she introduced various tales of Hungarian minorities in the center of which was the topic of the “tree”, which children created a “fable tree” in connection to.

At each occasion throughout the program, mentored students learnt a Roma song, while related to tales and myths, they had discussions about Roma tales of origin, as well as Boyash Gypsy and Hungarian fables and myths besides Slovakian, Swabian, Armenian, Ruthenian, Polish and Ukrainian folk tales. At the end of the program, the Roma mentor and mentored students organized an exhibition from the fable trees.

Conclusions
“In general, the alternative and innovative features of the Roma Mentor Project differ from formal education in a way that the project completely breaks away from traditional educational content, embraces and broadcasts aspects of Roma folklore that are rarely present even in experimental educational locations. Learning about these aspects is essential for Roma children to realize that their Roma identity is not something to be ashamed of, rather it is just as valuable as their Hungarian identity. Therefore, the Roma Mentor Project – as opposed to formal education – contributes to the development of personality traits in children that are features of someone with double-identity. Thanks to these features, children value both their majority and minority identities, grow to harmonized adults and to adults who are able to function as valuable Hungarians and Roma people without complexes but with results and successes in collaboration with non-Roma peers, without prejudices and racism.

The alternative and innovative features of the program are reinforced by the fact that the central figure of the personal cognitive processes is a well-known and successful Roma mentor who is not only an intellectual but who grew to be successful and integrated into society from profession to profession coming from the same poverty, misery, depressive, hopeless and futureless situation as the
mentored Roma children. The program signals a way out for children if they follow the mentor in the learning activities, acquiring knowledge and general attitude, as well as the development of various skills. (Bogdán, P. (2012)"
The Roma Mentor Project could generally be described as an intra-educational project that has a direct impact on the local educational staff and pedagogues, as well as local educative work in a way that a mentor from Roma origins appears in the faculty as a colleague and as a Roma intellectual friend in multiply disadvantaged Roma and non-Roma children’s lives, which is especially true considering that the Roma mentor (together with the non-Roma pedagogue-coordinator) draws tools of socialization from Roma culture.

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