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FACTORS FOR READINESS OF ROMA CHILDREN FOR THE SCHOOL

Abstract: *The preschool and elementary school education of Roma children plays an important role in their integration in Croatia. Enrollment of Roma children in preschool activities from an early age is necessary to minimize language barriers in primary classes, thus reducing discrimination of Roma children in education and, later, in employment. We studied the readiness of Roma children for school with respect to parents' education, attendance of preschool programs and number of children in the family. We further explored the link between readiness for school and parents' education and residence location. The experience of many countries shows that Roma are in a weak social position, and the biggest reason for this is the low level of education, which makes them unskilled to do most jobs and thus has a high unemployment rate. The plan to prepare Roma children for more successful enrollment in preschool and school activities can be structured differently to minimize the impact of the language barrier. Adapting the curriculum includes measures to provide extra tutoring and opportunities for education in the Roma language, improving schools' material conditions, and organizing remedial classes with special assistance in mastering a particular subject, summer and winter schools.*

Keywords: *education of Roma children, preschool education, Roma culture*

INTRODUCTION

The values, standards, attitudes, beliefs and ideas under which we considered culture make the identity of a certain group (national, ethnical, racial, gender, linguistically) (Bartulović, 2011). Traditionally, Roma in Croatia have been confined to enclaves, with few opportunities for integration. The language and education barrier played a great role in this. Roma children can be successful, provided that they have support from both their parents and educational system. Special attention should be dedicated to children's preparation for schooling, which starts in preschool age (Ivanović & Lepeš, 2013; Lepeš & Ivanović, 2013). This support has to start as early as possible and last for as long as needed. One of the school's tasks is promoting intercultural education (Sablić, 2011). The importance of participatory pedagogy as the basis is promoting interculturality and achieving lasting social transformation (Daniel, 2001).

The preschool and elementary school education of Roma children plays an important role in their integration into Croatian society. There are various forms of integration: cultural, structural, social, and educational (Srdić & Cvjetićanin, 2012). Institutional education, held in kindergartens, primary schools and other educational courses, has a social, as well as an educational function, building relationships between students from the Roma community and majority population (Liegeois, 2009, p. 201). Romas are, due to their generally low education and social position, in a hard position; remedying the difference in education to the majority population will present a major step toward integration into Croatian society (Benčić, 2011, p. 118). Schools are a place to learn about democratic values and to teach and educate all students, whether they are members of a minority or not, so that they can and know how to respect the pluralism and values of nondiscrimination (Horvat, 2020).

Remedial action has been shown to be most efficient starting at an early age. Intercultural education has become a very important feature in the process of introducing and understanding different cultures (Bedeković, 2011). Schools play a large role in the promotion of intercultural education, which enhances interaction and cultural integration. Teacher is an important factor in intercultural communication (Foro, 2013). Educating educators was a necessary step in this direction, and working with children of various cultural origins is one of the competences necessary for working with children in classrooms (Piršl, 2011). The concept of intercultural education will considerably depend on adopted teaching concepts, models and strategies of intercultural curriculum toward cultural integration, implementation in educational practice and in intercultural community (Hrvatić, 2011, p. 10).

It is necessary to plan and prepare for the enrollment of Roma children –, e.g., some of the preschool activities can be structured differently to minimize the impact of the language barrier. In turn, this will allow them to more easily acquire language skills, adapt better in primary school classes and thus reduce discrimination of Roma children in education and, later, in employment. An important role in communication with majority has a positive relationship of minority with majority's culture and vice versa (Benčić, 2011, p. 122).

It is necessary to adjust the teaching curriculum, provide extended day programs, offer instruction in the Roma language, ensure material provisions for them for attending elementary school, and provide additional assistance in mastering the school subjects. To gain better achievements in Roma children's education, it is necessary to acknowledge (Hrvatić & Ivančić, 2000; Hrvatić, 2005; 2009; 2010; 2014) distinctive features of Roma's national and cultural identity (language, tribal and economy hierarchy, culture and art, religious declaring, lifestyle), the theoretical frame of certain aspects of approach toward Roma education in the world and in Croatia, the real number of spreading of Roma's settlers in Croatia, guidelines and models of European associations, the experience of other minorities, scientific elaboration of world and national (Croatian) experience in intercultural approach to education, the results of conducted experimental programmes (projects) of specific school and teaching methodology for Roma and realistic possibilities in existing school system and structural parts of education in minority languages.

The language barrier is one of the major obstacles in the education of Roma people. Romani children start preschool and elementary school education with limited knowledge of the Croatian language, which causes them to lag behind other children of their age. One of the reasons is that the majority of Romani children do not use the Croatian language with their families, and the other is that their parents in general have a low level of education and lack the motivation of each Croatian for their children.

PREPARING INDIGENOUS CHILDREN FOR LEARNING

Preparing for school is an extremely important indicator of further success in the education of each child. Usually, groups that include children who belong to culturally groups different from the local population are not ready for school because they do not recognize the importance of preparation for school. The language they use is often different from the language used in school, which is why they lag even further behind at the very beginning of their education (Romero-Little,

2010). In regard to Roma children, these differences are particularly pronounced. Participation and achievement in education among Roma children is significantly lower than among their non-Roma peers. However, the situation is improving in some countries. For example, in Hungary, 92 percent of Roma children participate in preschool programs, while 94 percent go to primary school. However, there are many problems, such as prejudice and segregation. Additionally, in schools that are only for Roma, the quality of education is significantly lower than in public schools, which leads to early school leaving, especially for Roma women. (Collins & Draghici, 2015; Rostas, 2019). Preschools enable Roma children to adopt many values that they cannot learn in their family due to greater cultural differences. This mostly refers to language and everyday interactions in society and culture. The school presents new conditions and challenges for them, and the task of the preschool institution is to better prepare them for that (Hrvatić, 2014).

Another example is Romania, which has a large number of Roma. The existence of legal and institutional frameworks for the protection of Roma rights improves their position in society, but their distrust of the local population remains. Although the importance of Roma integration is emphasized, such changes are in reality very slow. It is important to establish deeper analyses of the reasons why changes do not occur here. There is a lot of mention of the assimilation and integration of the Roma, without asking questions that would determine the reasons for their marginalization. If we see who is marginalizing them and why, we could get closer to solving this problem. Another issue is the education of Roma people and their inclusion in the education system. What is missing here is not the integration of the Roma but the education of the entire population. Increasing the level of education of Roma people will not lead to their better position in society because society is unprepared to accept Roma people (Boscoboinik et al., 2011). A better level of education would help empower the Roma voice and improve a social position (Plaut & Memedova, 2005).

To improve the position of Roma in society, but in the school system, especially inclusion in school, local policies must be harmonized with state ones. It is also important to provide funds so that these policies can be implemented. It is necessary to obtain the support of local institutions, which include schools. For Roma children to be fully integrated into the education system, integration alone is not enough. The full participation of Roma children and their parents in public education must be achieved. Increased participation will increase their motivation and confidence in the success of the school educational program in general (OSF, 2011). Curriculum is the scientific basis of goals, tasks, content, plan and program, organization and technology of implementation and various forms (Previšić, 2005; 2007). The curriculum should provide a foundation of literacy and knowledge of mathematics in accordance with age (IOD, 2007). Additionally, quality pedagogical-psychological, didactic and professional education will enable creativity and adaptation to complex demanding and challenges that are set before him by globalization processes (Piršl, 2011).

CONCEPTS AND MODELS OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

Minorities in the Republic of Croatia have the right to bilingual education. For this, there are various laws that regulate and determine education in their language and script but also according to their culture, with the direction of development toward multiculturalism. It is regulated by The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (OG 56/90, 135/97, 8/98, 113/00, 124/00, 28/01, 41/01, 55/01, 76/10), The Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities (OG 155/02) and The Law on Education in the Language and Script of National Minorities (OG 51/00 and 56/00) (Ivanković, 2017). Many studies show the great advantages of bilingual education, especially in the development of multicultural competencies, communication skills, cognitive abilities and advantages, increasing the level of empathy and faster adoption of information at a younger school age (Arizmendi et al. 2018; Calvo and Bialystok, 2013; Ratiu & Azuma, 2015; Schroeder & Marian, 2012; Wei, 2006).

Ferguson et al. (1977) state ten goals of bilingual education: 1st is assimilation of individuals or social communities into the wider social environment, 2nd is unification of a

multilingual society within one state, such as creation of unity between ethnically, nationally and linguistically different social communities, 3rd goal is multilingualism that allows all speakers of a state to communicate with speakers of other languages, 4th is development of multilingual abilities and skills needed for employment and personal development, 5th is preservation of ethnic and linguistic identity, 6th is mediation between linguistically and politically diverse entities within the state, 7th is dissemination of colonial languages, 8th is preserving and strengthening the social position of elite groups, 9th is equalizing the legal status of languages that do not have the same status as the majority language, and 10th is strengthening the understanding of the relationship between language and culture. Baker (2011) establishes models of bilingual education that are used in most states. There are, according to Baker, three types of models. The first category is the "monolingual model of education" in which students belonging to a minority assimilate into the community and the education is in the native language. The second category is the "weak bilingual model", in which students attend classes in the language of their minority and at the same time learn their native language. When they acquire enough knowledge and skills to use the local language, they gradually move on to teaching in the local language. The third model is the "strong bilingual model" in which students use both minority and native languages on an equal footing. This model best develops bilingualism.

ROMA POPULATION IN PRESCHOOL AND SCHOOL

Data about the Roma population are presented in Međimurje County from 2004 to 2011. (Table 1). In this period, the Roma population and the number of Roma children included in preschool programs increased. However, there was no significant change in the enrollment of Roma children in the 1st grade of elementary school. Illiteracy among the Roma population leads to unawareness of the importance of education. Little education is available in their mother language, and few Roma are fluent in the Croatian language. This further negatively affects their attitude toward education. A large number of Roma children come in the first year of primary school and are not able to master the Croatian language, leading to a large number of students having to repeat the class. A large number of repeaters are in fifth grade as a result of the increase in curriculum difficulty at that time. Other reasons for leaving school are a large number of absences, early marriage, lack of parental motivation for education, bad financial situation, long way from home to school, bad marks in school and conformism with nonschoolgoers. To counteract these tendencies, free schoolbooks, meals and transportation, as well as raising living standards, would reduce the Roma children dropping out of school. Involving parents in school workshops and making them realize the importance of education is also important. Preventive programs for reducing leaving primary school (individual interviews, expert assistance and material support) by teachers at a local and national level, supported by NGOs and Roma communities, are also effective. A larger number of Roma children in schools creates a desirable social atmosphere and reduces conflicts between Roma and non-Roma children. It creates a multicultural environment and cooperation at all levels, which is still important for intercultural teaching in schools.

Table 1

Roma population in Međimurje County

Year	2004.	2005.	2006.	2007.	2008.	2009.	2010.	2011.
Total in Međimurje county	3553	3775*	3997*	4219*	4441	4663*	4885*	5107
In preschool	119	166	150	150	143	178	223	254

|							
programmes							
In 1st grade elementary school	263	274	276	314	282	269	242	228

*Approximate number. The total registered Roma population in Croatia increased from 1257. (0.03) in 1971. to 16 975. in 2011. (0.4)
Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2020)

The enrollment of Roma children in elementary and secondary schools, as well as the estimated total Roma population in Međimurje County, is shown in figure 1. The number of Roma children decreased in the period from the 1st grade of elementary school to the 4th grade of secondary school. It was shown that higher student achievement and better educational level of their parents contribute to lower dropout rates. Better educated parents are considered to be those who have at least completed primary school education. Low-educated parents are those parents who did not graduate from elementary school. Children coming from such families had the lowest results of the school readiness test we used. School day care and additional remedial teaching are available to children achieving poor results in school. School workshops for parents are rarely visited by Roma parents, further complicating the cycle of low education. The most important task for preschool education programs is teaching Roma children the Croatian language to allow a better chance of integration into the education system. Preprimary education also brings the Roma in contact with moral values and principles of educational upbringing.

Figure 1

Roma children in Međimurje schools
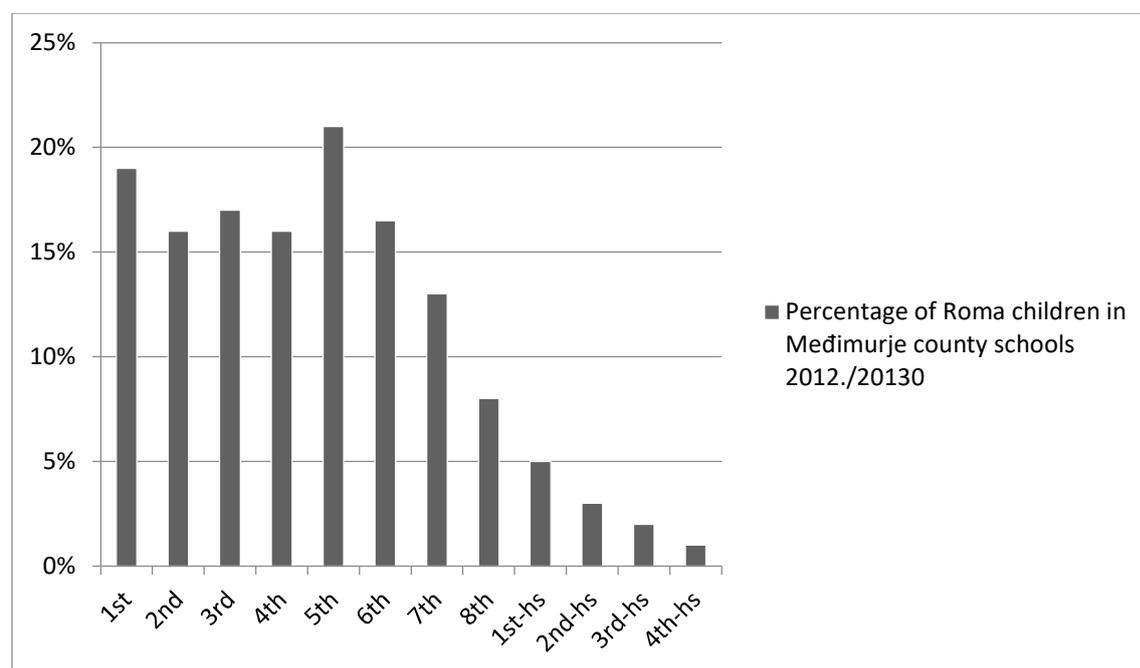
METHODOLOGY

Aims of the research

A study was conducted on the readiness of Roma children for school with respect to parents' education, attendance of preschool programs and number of children in the family. It was expected that children who were involved in some kind of preschool programs would be better prepared for school than their peers who were not involved in such programs. Furthermore, the

link between the readiness for school and parents' education, number of household members and residence location is also explored.

Research methodology and study design

In choosing research instruments, we placed emphasis on quantitative analysis to maximize the objectivity of our results. We perceived a role of this study in the possible evaluation of community interventions to facilitate follow-up and comparisons to similar research elsewhere. We opted for previously available research instruments. We evaluated student readiness using a slightly modified "Step by step" parent association questionnaire. The questions in the questionnaire contained particles that examined the benefits of working with parents. This was examined at the levels of attitudes about active family participation, joint responsibilities of educators and parents, communication and expectations from preschool programs (Kirsten et al., 2001). This covered basic entrance skills as well as parent education, place of residence, and number of siblings. The added categories provided stratification to student groups. The school readiness of the child was examined (Biro et al., 2009; Novović, 2013).

Sample and instruments

The research was conducted in Međimurje County elementary schools where any significant number of Roma children were enrolled, typically those in close proximity to Roma enclaves. These comprised elementary schools in Kuršanec, Mala Subotica, Macinec, Pribislavec, Kotoriba, Orehovica and Mursko Središće. The sample consisted of 198 Roma children enrolled in the first grade of elementary school. Estimates were made by expert associates analyzing children's works. This procedure also included an interview with the parents, and the parents of all the children were examined. This amounted to 91.66% of all Roma first graders in the county. The second part of the research involved a scale "Korak po Korak primary school entrance assessment questionnaire'' that measures performance in several categories from 0 to 2 points (the overview of assessment areas is presented in table 2.). The points are added together, giving a maximum amount of 36 points. The questionnaire also encompassed structured interviews with parents about their own education, number of children in the family, and place of residence. Interviews were performed by elementary school teachers.

Table 2

Topics in the primary school entrance assessment questionnaire

General self-awareness - name, age, place of residence, siblings, preschool program attendance
Time awareness and communication - activities during the day, parts of the day, courtesies and greetings
Visual perception and memory - naming six common items
Generalization and reasoning - recognizing pictures, forming logical sequences
Speech and vocabulary development - recognizing sounds, pronunciation
Mathematical knowledge - numbers up to 10, sets, relationships
Color naming - primary colors
Finding commonalities - pairing images with similar qualities
Graphomotor skills - drawing elements on a prepared worksheet
Spatial orientation - identifying directions in the environment and own body
Body awareness - identifying parts of own body
Student cooperation assessment

Analysis

Data were organized, and initial descriptive statistics and graphical representation were performed using Microsoft Excel. Further statistical analysis was conducted with SPSS 21.0. Due

to sample size and distribution, for statistical significance, the Kruskal–Wallis test with a cutoff of $p < 0.05$ was chosen.

Results of the research

The data confirm that children involved in preschool programs score significantly better at the primary school readiness assessment. Longer involvement yields a higher score (figure 2; $p = 0.002$). Most Roma children are included in the preschool education system. The aim of preschool education is the adoption of work and hygiene practices, learning the Croatian language, preparing for communication and knowledge in elementary school, socialization and integration in the wider society. Some of the Roma have been involved in a preschool program, and some have been involved in the nursery. These results show that involvement in preschool programs certainly had a very positive effect on the results of the readiness questionnaire. Although Roma children have many difficulties in primary schooling, mainly due to their lack of language skills, the length of participation in kindergarten programs has a positive effect on their initial skills.
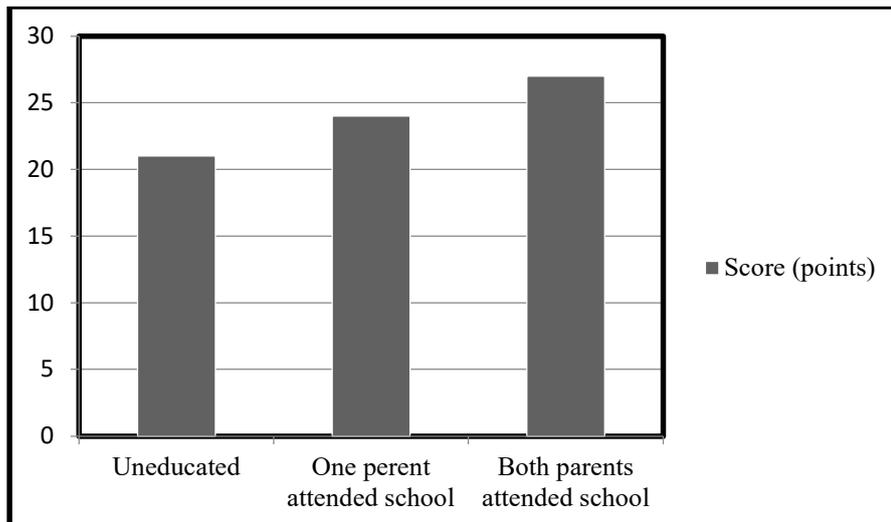
Figure 2

Average score on the primary school readiness assessment by time spent in preschool programs
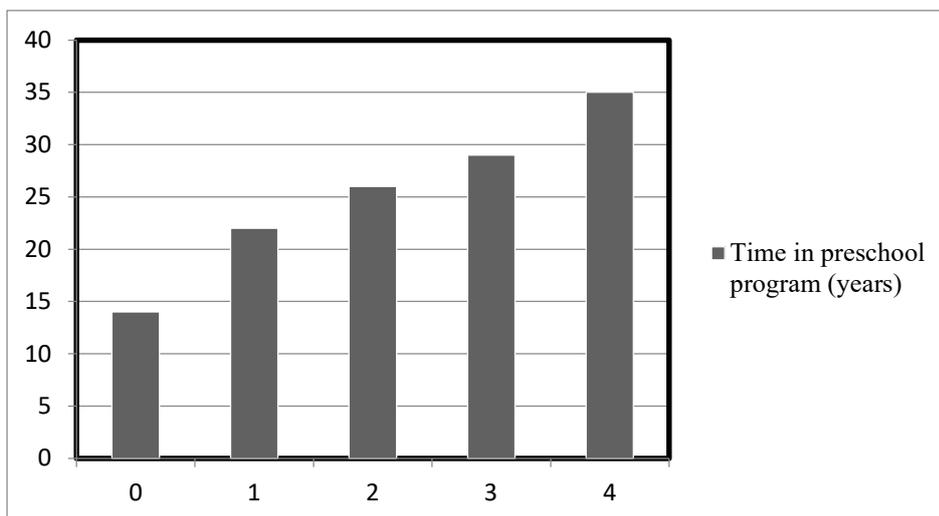
Parents' education correlated strongly with the readiness score, with more educated parents having higher-scoring children (figure 3; $p < 0.001$). The first column shows parents who have not completed any grade of elementary school or have completed several grades. The second column shows one parent who finished the seventh class, primary school and the course. The third column shows secondary school, college or university education. The most common reasons for low education rates are poor material conditions, lack of conditions for learning, lack of parental motivation, early marriage, and earning for a living. The workshops or elective course teaching the Roma culture and programs for better integration of Roma and non-Roma children should be organized.
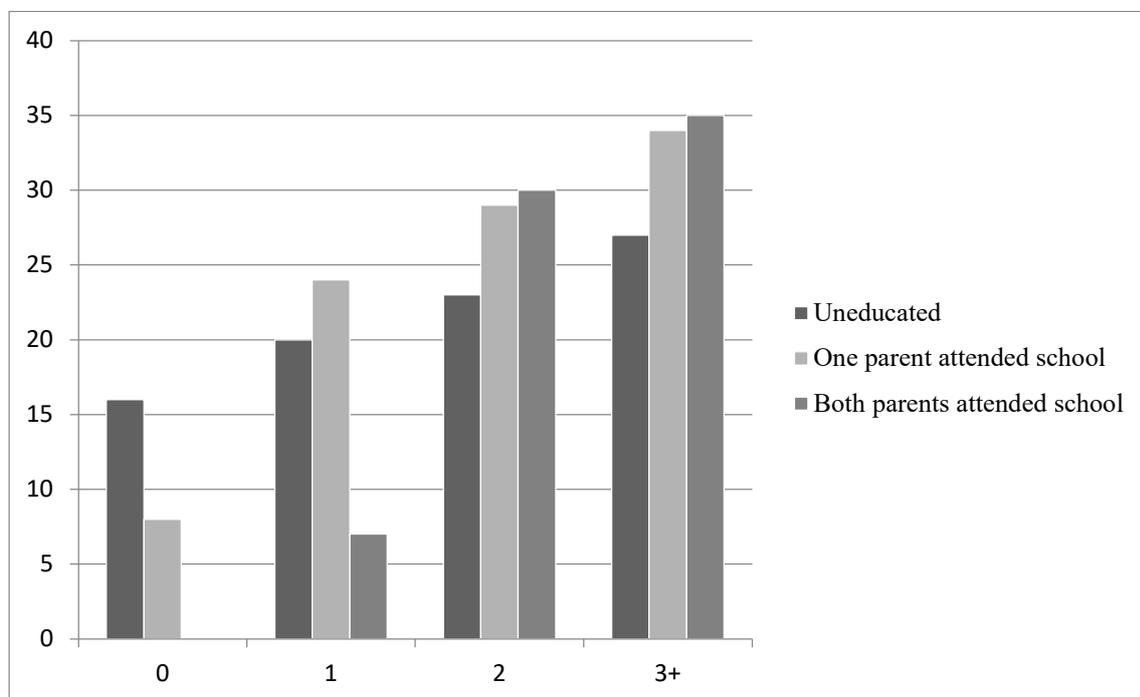
Figure 3

Average score on the primary school readiness assessment by parent education

The period spent in kindergarten/preschool contributes to such a difference even when parents' education is considered (figure 4; p = 0.03). It can be seen here that preschool programs had a statistically significant impact on all children, regardless of parental education. Although it would be expected that it would not significantly affect the children of uneducated parents, it is clear that this is not the case. Certainly, the influence of parents' education cannot be ignored, which also proved to be a factor in the success of the survey.

Figure 4

Average score on the primary school readiness assessment by time spent in preschool programs and parent education.


There was no difference in test scores according to place of living, proving a uniform approach in all the preschool institutions in our county (figure 5; p = 0.08). Parents' material conditions also do not seem to be very significant. The support of the educational environment is equally present in all Roma enclaves. These data suggest the possibility of generalizing the conclusion that any participation in preschool programs, regardless of their quality and venue, has

a positive impact on school readiness. In the context of Roma readiness, it can be concluded that it would be highly desirable for them to attend any preschool institution. This raises the question of whether this also applies to members of other minority nations, which everyone would do well to investigate in the future.

Figure 5

Average score on the primary school readiness assessment by location, displaying uniform sores in all Roma

enclaves
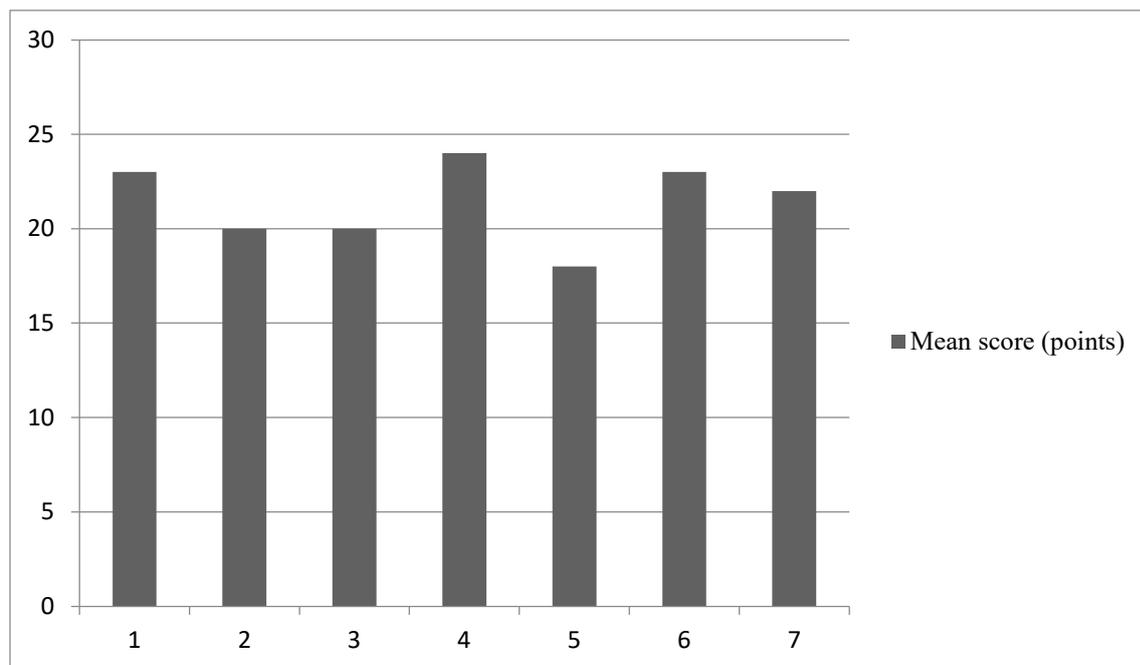
DISCUSSION

For the Roma to successfully integrate into society, it is important that they integrate into all segments of society (Hrvatić, 2004), and the best start for this is school and preschool. It is important to avoid social marginalization here (Silber, 1995), and their education is precisely the most important factor in preventing marginalization (Šućur, 2000). The demographic process in the Republic of Croatia is mostly negative, and these trends are not improving (Mrđen, 2004; Nejašmić, 2008). Bartulović and Kušević (2016) emphasize the importance of intercultural levels in education. It is necessary to systematically fight against prejudices that arise regarding the Roma and to guide other students to approach them without discrimination.

Šlezak (2013) conducts research on the impact of the Roma population on the overall level of education of the total population of Međimurje County. He states that a significant part of the Roma population has never attended any formal school and that they are illiterate. A small number of Roma graduated from high school, while only two were university educated. The direct consequence is that they are not qualified for any more complex jobs, which also affects the high unemployment rate of members of the Roma national minority. The education index of the Roma population is almost zero, while the education index of the population of the observed Međimurje County is 1.64. Lapat and Gornik (2007) investigate what educational outcomes Roma achieve in relation to Croats. The results of the research show that the Roma achieved significantly lower results compared to the Croats in all areas, especially in the tasks of words in mathematics. As a reason for this, the authors cite the poor educational status of parents, poor living conditions, and insufficient knowledge of the Croatian language. As one of the solutions, the authors see special preschool programs for Roma, which would make it easier for them to understand and follow

classes in the Croatian language. Tomšić and Bakić-Tomić (2015) investigate how the public perceives the Roma, and the obtained results indicate the existence of a significant gap. They see the reason for this in the specific cultural elements of the Roma, which are very different from the local population and thus distance them, and the biggest obstacle is spatial segregation. Radetić-Paić (2010) points out that Roma education should and could be an intercultural medium that would be used in their integration into society. Spajić-Vrkaš et al. (2019) examine students' attitudes about Roma peers. Their peers note that Roma are often less socially and financially disadvantaged than others, but they also often see problems in their family life, such as lack of living space and frequent addictions.

The importance of going to preschool is also evidenced by research (Bagić et al., 2014; Hrvatić, 2014), which emphasizes the importance of the existence of preschool influence on their language skills and socialization. Mother tongue language is unhelpful in this process as well as in considering the implications of living in several languages for systemic therapy (Burck, 2011). Parents of Roma children also confirmed in a UNICEF study that they noticed that children who attended preschool had fewer difficulties communicating and dealing with peers (Bagić et al., 2014). The development of intercultural competencies, such as tolerance, empathy and interaction, enables teachers to become aware of and remove these barriers (Drandić, 2013). It is important to point out the role of teachers in Roma education, which is great regardless of their readiness for school. Teachers can flow to the environment and thus provide them with better opportunities for progress (Mlinarević et al., 2015), which is especially important for students who are less ready for school obligations. Miloradov (2021) finds that most teachers believe that it is more difficult to work with Roma children and that in most cases, it depends on the education of parents. Teachers also stated that they are sometimes motivated by giving higher grades and that they often need to be further encouraged to use the Croatian language in speech. Horvat (2020) notes that most schools are also implementing additional measures to enable Roma to succeed more. To achieve this, they organize additional extended stays only for Roma children, additional hours of learning the Croatian language and the employment and inclusion of Roma assistants in teaching. Some schools even have special shifts for Roma children.

Nikšić (2004) observes the different positions of the Roma in Hungary. He also states that the level of education of the Roma population is very low, which creates the most problems in employment. These factors continue to hamper the integration and assimilation of the Roma into society. Although these results have been viewed from the perspective of the very beginning of the 21st century, nothing has changed thus far. Raduški (2004) observes the positions of Roma in Serbia in the same categories. He points out that their social position is difficult and that they are marginalized and often victims of marginalization. He sees the reasons for this in the weak socioeconomic and cultural situation. The reason for the lack of opportunities to successfully integrate into the local population and this author points out poor education, or lack thereof.

CONCLUSION

Roma children clearly benefited from a longer time spent in the preschool program; ideally, this would be longer than one year. An earlier involvement in preschool education programs would also be beneficial. Once these children enter elementary school, they should continue to be monitored to avoid early dropout due to controllable circumstances. Parents should be involved in educational policy, both improving their own education and motivating them to further the education of their children. Measures to this end include courses in the Croatian language, education on the negative impact of early marriage, and other possible barriers to education.

All preschool programs have a role in improving living standards, developing children's skills, hygiene and working habits, socialization and integration. Adapting the curriculum includes measures to provide extra tutoring and opportunities for education in the Roma language, improving schools' material conditions, and organizing remedial classes with special assistance in mastering a particular subject, summer and winter schools.

There is a clear positive relationship between attendance of preschool programs and school readiness of Roma children. Early involvement of Roma children in preschool programs has a proven effect on school readiness. Any involvement at all in such programs significantly increases their readiness for school and, by extension, their integration into society. The results of the research clearly indicate that the length of attendance at preschool institutions has a positive effect on the readiness of Roma children for school. This is mostly reflected in a better knowledge of the Croatian language, the development of hygienic habits and work habits and relationships with peers. Parents' education is also a factor in school readiness, which has not been statistically significant, but it should certainly be noted that children of more educated parents are to some extent more ready for school. The results also indicate that place of residence does not significantly affect school readiness. The education of Roma children is expected to increase with the increase in their parents' education. Preschool programs are expected to directly contribute to raising the percentage of Roma children with primary and secondary education. The children of today are the parents of tomorrow – educated parents want their children to be educated as well.

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