

RACISM TOWARDS CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE – AND HOW TO OVERCOME

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“I had been attending a vocational school for tourism, and in my second year I had to complete an internship. I applied for an internship to various hotels, but was never invited for an interview whilst my colleagues were quite successful. The only difference between their applications and mine was that I have a Turkish background. At last I was invited by a big hotel chain to come to an interview. I talked to the human resources manager on the phone, who was very enthusiastic about my application and offered me an internship within the management section of the hotel. On the day of the interview, I was very happy. I introduced myself to the human resource manager and wanted to settle the formal things with her, as we had agreed on the phone. But her comportment towards me had changed, and finally she told me that she was sorry, but that she could not employ me, if I didn't take off my headscarf.”¹

Racism and racist discrimination towards children and young people is not easily visible within everyday life in wealthy Europe, but it does exist – harassment in schools, by pupils as

well as by teachers, direct discrimination when applying for schools, internships, apprenticeships etc. and institutional discrimination by the educational system as such is widespread and denies children and young people with a migrant or minority background equal access to equal opportunities.

This article aims on the one hand to show where racist discrimination towards children does happen in Europe, what the legal framework looks like and what is and should be done beyond the law to fight it.

I will focus my analysis on what happens within the educational system as it gives a good picture on what happens in everyday life to children with a migrant or minority background – because education is the place where a discriminatory system starts – and where it can be changed.

Racist discrimination within the educational system in Europe

Education is the key to take part in society, providing equal learning opportunities for all – ir-

respective of their background – and is the most important factor to minimize discrimination.

In most European countries the school system as such is segregating children according to their background. And it is not just ethnic background, but religion and/or mother-tongue, which really makes the difference at school and which paves the way for equal opportunities or not.

Denying equal access to equal opportunities

Pupils with a migrant or minority background are more likely not to finish school, they are more likely to attend schools offering a lower level of education, the percentage of children with a migrant or minority background, who attend special schools for children with learning deficiencies is very much higher than within the majority population. And at the same time they are underrepresented in higher education. Germany and Austria are countries with a highly differentiated school system and in both countries enrolment statistics reveal that the majority of non-Austrian/German pupils take classes in the “Hauptschule” (secondary school), whereas the majority of Austrian/German pupils attend “Gymnasium” (high school).² On grounds of the PISA 2003 survey a research by the Danish Technological Institute revealed that it is not necessarily the foreign background of a child as such but the educational system, which is relevant for the performance at school – and so for equal starting positions for life. Having similar profiles of non-European foreign nationals, the performance of German students with a foreign background was relatively worse than that of Danish students with a foreign background.³ The same goes for France and Belgium: French students with an African background were much closer in performance

to students with no migration background than the ones visiting Belgian schools.

One of the main findings of the study was the fact that besides general ideal learning conditions such as small classes etc. high density of students with a foreign background⁴ reduces their performance rate: “Germany (132 points lower), Sweden (67 points lower), the Netherlands (51 points lower), Austria (66 points lower) and Denmark (33 points lower),”⁵ which is a very clear contraindication to segregated school systems.

The results in the table illustrate that non-native students who attend schools with high densities (40% or more) of non-native students have lower achievements than non-native students who attend schools with low densities (less than 10%). The more non-native students are mixed with native students, the better are their achievements as regards basic skills. This tendency generally applies for both mathematics, reading, and science, and remains when adjusting for the socio-economic background of the non-native students. In other words: When studying non-native students with similar socioeconomic background, the average achievement score of these students depends on the density of non-native students in the school they attend.

In some countries, the percentage of non-native students attending schools with high densities of non-native students (40% or more) is high. In reading, this is the case for the Netherlands (34,7%), Sweden (31%), Germany (28,1%), Norway (26%), Austria (26%), and Denmark (25,3%).

In these countries, the average achievement scores of these students are considerably lower than those of students attending schools with a density of non-native students below

Average reading scores among 15-year-old, non-native students attending schools with different densities of non-native students (PISA 2003)⁶

Country	Density of non-native students				Score difference (low-high density)
	40% or more		less than 10%		
	Share of non-native students in schools with high density of non native students	Avg. reading achievement score for non-native students	Share of non-native students in schools with low density of non-native students	Avg. reading achievement score for non-native students	
Slovakia	3,3	282	76,2	452	170
Hungary	1,0	346	98,5	484	138
Portugal	5,1	335	60,8	469	134
Germany	28,1	359	28,6	491	132
Sweden	31,7	428	27,5	495	66
United States	14,8	431	43,1	496	66
Austria	26,0	389	35,8	454	66
The Netherlands	34,7	448	35,9	499	51
EU average	39,7	431	37,5	472	42
Italy	6,7	391	82,0	432	41
Greece	16,5	411	53,5	445	35
Belgium	15,9	399	61,1	432	34
Denmark	25,3	430	41,5	463	33
Iceland	6,2	408	80,0	432	23
Latvia	24,3	476	59,8	488	12
Norway	26,1	426	50,1	438	12
Spain	11,6	440	56,3	441	2
Turkey	3,8	467	96,2	453	- 13
Finland	0,4	516	83,2	455	- 61

Source: PISA 2003 dataset. Data not available for the Czech Republic, France, Ireland, HK China, Japan, and Korea.

10%: Germany (132 points lower), Sweden (67 points lower), the Netherlands (51 points lower), Austria (66 points lower) and Denmark (33 points lower).

The implication is that in this group of countries, the high percentage of non-native

students attending schools with a high density of non-native students may be a problem in itself, reinforcing low achievements. Consequently, these countries should reflect on possible initiatives for reducing the density of non-native students in particular schools.

Direct discrimination

Cases of girls denied access to schools or to vocational training because of wearing a headscarf like the one at the beginning of this article are wide-spread within the European Union member states.⁷ Schools and companies are arguing about the necessity of uniforms and with risk or hygienic arguments – like “the headscarf could be a danger whilst operating with machines,” “pupils and trainees working in kitchens have to wear “chef’s hats” because of hygienic reasons” or “wearing the company’s corporate design uniform is a precondition for a job/traineeship.” All these arguments do not help against the fact that these compartments constitute discrimination on the grounds of religion, which is very often motivated by prejudice against a certain ethnic group, and that young girls are denied equal access to education because of their ethnic and/or religious background. And all these arguments can be overcome quite easily as there are examples of companies integrating headscarves within their corporate design uniforms, there are examples of companies designing special headscarf types, which fulfil religious guidelines as well as security or hygienic ones.

Another aspect building barriers for young people is bearing the “wrong” name. Like the case shows, when applying for the internship the name as an indication of the ethnic background of a person makes a big difference when it comes to being invited to an interview or not. A study carried out by the ILO in 1994 on the basis of “Application Testing” in Denmark and in the United Kingdom showed that the first phone call makes a difference depending on the name of the applicant. Wearing a Moroccan name in the Netherlands meant being discriminated against in this first phase of application

in 23% of the cases. Phone calls for exactly the same jobs with the same job qualification backgrounds caused as different reaction as such:

To Moroccan tester: “Hi, Mustafa, brother! It is a shame, but you are too late! Thanks for calling!”

To Dutch tester: “Can you tell me something about yourself? [...], sounds good, you can come for an interview.”⁸

In 2001 a complaint concerning a denominational school, having institutionalized a quota policy regarding the number of ethnic minority students admitted to the school was brought before the Dutch Equal Treatment Commission. Pupils with an ethnic minority background were set on a waiting list until the quota allowed them to be admitted to the school. Even when educational arguments were brought up by the school, the Equal Treatment Commission still decided that by maintaining a waiting list for ethnic minority children, the school was directly discriminating on the basis of race.⁹

And in similar cases, when students were rejected when applying for (obligatory) internships, the very same Commission even stated that school had to counteract discrimination of their students in these cases according to the Dutch legal situation.

The importance of language

One of the most important factors of exclusion is language. In most European countries knowledge of the majority language is absolutely necessary to take part in the system, it is a precondition for high quality education and thus for equal starting positions. And language competence is very crucial in everyday life – what has been neglected by (school) politics for a very long time is that language competence in the mother tongue is a precondition for reach-

ing a high level of language competence in the second language – and what is neglected as well is the benefit pupils could gain because of their language competencies. The above-mentioned study of the Danish Technological Institute revealed as one of its key findings on how to improve performance of students with foreign background that bilingual tuition and mother-tongue instruction is a really successful tool.¹⁰ However, only a small minority of European schools systems offer this possibility. Furthermore, most (Western) European school schedules still reduce their language training on Western European languages, whilst acknowledgement of language competencies as a benefit and not as a handicap would change a lot in terms of acceptance and would be an important step on the way to more equality of opportunities.

Moreover in some cases, racial discrimination occurs through the inclusion of racial stereotyping in educational and training materials. In German and Austrian kindergartens and grammar schools the use of the stereotyping book “10 kleine Negerlein” is still very common and does not cause very much irritation to parents. A letter to the publishers by ZARA in 2002 explaining the bad influence of stereotyping in early childhood was answered as follows: “As long as the book is sold, we will keep it on our list.”

By integrating racial stereotyping – be it by using discriminating language or books using discriminatory phrases and pictures, like “stealing gypsies”, “semi-naked black people” etc. – in the learning context, especially at an early age, children are taught to accept racial stereotyping as the norm, as the truth, and thus such racial discrimination is consolidated and racial stereotypes perpetuated as a norm within society.

Roma children

“The most vulnerable group experiencing racism and discrimination in education are the Roma ... In reports on educational inequality, two of the main concerns are those of segregation, and the over-representation of certain groups in “special education.” Whilst several member states report these as issues for various migrant/minority groups, by far the largest number of references to these problems specifically concerns the Roma. Disproportionately high concentrations of Roma pupils in certain classes and an over-readiness to label Roma children as educationally disabled and with learning difficulties were reported by several member states.”¹¹

For Roma children in Europe all that was stated above is valid doubly and triply. There is a wide variation in enrolment rates, in performance figures and in obtaining final degrees. Stereotypes excluding Roma from society, low socio-economic backgrounds and a variety of discriminatory mechanisms of exclusion and segregation are keeping a discriminatory system up, which is very hard to counteract.

The Roma Rights Centre carried out a research on Roma in education,¹² which was complicated by the lack of official data, but which nevertheless produced quite some relevant information for an assessment of the situation.

___ Roma pupils’ enrolment and attendance rates are poor, Roma pupils tend to leave education early without the qualifications they would need to compete successfully in the labor market.

___ Segregation of Roma and non-Roma children is very common as a result of educational policies and practices limiting equal access to education for Roma children.

___ Assignment of Roma pupils to special education for the mentally handicapped is a common policy (rates are especially high in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic), a practice leading to continuing social exclusion by limiting future employment opportunities, violating the principle of equal treatment and reinforcing negative stereotyping.

___ Lack of awareness on the side of teachers and parents on the negative effects of school segregation and of assignment to special education.

___ Culturally biased assessment procedures for placing pupils in special schools.

___ Harassment, racist attacks and scape-goating by peers and teachers, resulting in social exclusion and isolation, are wide-spread. And they start a vicious circle as the danger of harassment and racist attacks in mainstream schools prompts parents to send their children to special schools, where the majority is of Romani background, to prevent them from being discriminated against.

Cases

One Romani mother explained to the ERRC: “I have six children, five daughters (6, 10, 11, 12, and 16-years-old) and a son (4 years old). I was very angry. They put all my children into Class C right away. That is the class for the stupid. They call it a play class. There they study everything in a playful manner because their brain does not have the capacity to study better. They tested my 6-year-old daughter without me knowing about it. She knew already how to read when she went to school; still she was put in Class C. Now she teaches the others in her class.”¹³

Another Romani mother reported the following case of how prejudice can lead to segregation: “My daughter started the first school

year in Class A. She was the only Romani child in her class. All the other Romani children were placed in Class B. Teachers say that children with lower learning ability attend there. She attended the fourth class, when a non-Romani child claimed that he lost his book. The teachers did not say directly that she was the thief but all children and teachers stressed the fact that she was the only Romani student in the class, so she felt that everybody was suspecting her. Soon after this event, her math teacher graded her suddenly 2 at the end of the semester, although she had always 4 at math. Based on her math grade, the director of the school claimed that she was not so clever and directed her to continue her studies in Class B, together with all the other Romani pupils. She felt really awful and stigmatized, because it was so unjust.”¹⁴ An almost identical case was reported by a 16-year-old Romani student: “We get to feel in the school that we are Romani. First I went to the proper class, but there I was accused of stealing the earring of a Hungarian girl, and then it turned out that it had been her girlfriend’s fault. But I was transferred to the slower class where most of the children are Romani anyway.”¹⁵ In Spain, a private television station tested kindergartens on their admission policy regarding Roma children. One journalist was given the advice by a member of the state organization of kindergartens “not to admit any gypsy children” when opening a kindergarten or “else soon you will be swamped with gypsies.” Aware that this is an unlawful practice, he was furthermore advised to place Romani children on a waiting list.¹⁶

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- 1 Cases like this one are very typical and are being reported to counselling organisations like ZARA, www.zara.or.at and others around Europe on a regular basis.
- 2 EUMC (ed.), “The Annual Report on the Situation regarding Racism and Xenophobia in the member States of the EU,” European Communities 2006, <http://eumc.europa.eu/eumc/material/pub/aro6/ARo6-P2-EN.pdf>, p. 76.
- 3 Danish Technological Institute (ed.), Jens Henrik Haahr et al., “Explaining Student Performance. Evidence from the International PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS surveys,” 2005, http://www.danishtechnology.dk/_root/media/19176%5FFinal%20report%20web%20version.pdf, p. 81f.
- 4 Defined at least 40% of all students have another mother tongue than the test language of the country concerned.
- 5 Danish Technological Institute (ed.), Jens Henrik Haahr et al., “Explaining Student Performance. Evidence from the International PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS surveys,” 2005, http://www.danishtechnology.dk/_root/media/19176%5FFinal%20report%20web%20version.pdf, p. 81f.
- 6 Danish Technological Institute (ed.), Jens Henrik Haahr et al., “Explaining Student Performance. Evidence from the International PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS Surveys,” 2005, http://www.danishtechnology.dk/_root/media/19176%5FFinal%20report%20web%20version.pdf, p. 82.
- 7 For examples see: ZARA – Verein für Zivilcourage und Anti-Rassismus-Arbeit (ed.), “Racism Reports 2001–2005,” Vienna, 2002–2006, <http://www.zara.or.at/materialien/rassismus-report/ECCRI> (ed.), Annual Report 2003–2004, Budapest 2005.
- 8 For more information on methodology and outcomes of the testing see F. Bovenkerk et al., “International Migration Papers No. 4, Discrimination against migrant workers and ethnic minorities in access to employment in the Netherlands,” ILO, Geneva 1994, <http://www.ilo-mirror.cornell.edu/public/english/protection/migrant/download/imp/imp04.pdf>.
- 9 National Focal Point for the Netherlands (ed.), Rita Schriemer, Analytical Report on Education, Rotterdam 2004, <http://eumc.europa.eu/eumc/material/pub/RAXEN/4/edu/R4-EDU-NL.pdf>, p.29.
- 10 Bovenkerk (1994) p.11.
- 11 EUMC (ed.), “Racism and Xenophobia in the EU Member States, Trends, Developments and Good Practice, Annual Report 2005 – Part 2,” European Communities 2005, http://eumc.europa.eu/eumc/material/pub/aro5/ARo5_p2-EN.pdf, p. 13.

- 12 ERRC (ed.), "Stigmata: Segregated Schooling of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, a survey of patterns of segregated education of Roma in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia," Budapest 2004, <http://www.errc.org/db/oo/04/mooooooo04.pdf>.
 - 13 ERRC interview with Ms Gölles, 24 November 2002, Pécs, in: ERRC (2004), p.66.
 - 14 ERRC interview with Ms Mária Ferenc Gulyás, 20 October 2002, Gönc, *ibid*.
 - 15 ERRC interview with Mr Attila Bancsók, 28 October 2002, Forró, *ibid*.
 - 16 ERRC, "Barriers to the Education of Roma in Europe: A position paper by the European Roma Rights," Budapest 2002 <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=385>.
 - 17 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, entry into force 4 January 1969. http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/d_icerd.htm
 - 18 Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment of persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin. http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/pri/en/oj/dat/2000/l_180/l_18020000719en00220026.pdf
 - 19 Art. 2/2a Council Directive 2000/43/EC
 - 20 Art. 2/2b Council Directive 2000/43/EC
 - 21 Art. 2/3 Council Directive 2000/43/EC
 - 22 Art. 9 Council Directive 2000/43/EC
 - 23 European Independent Specialized Bodies are operating a network, Equinet, for information see <http://www.migpolgroup.com/topics/2078.html> (download 14.02.2007).
 - 24 Art. 15 Council Directive 2000/43/EC
 - 25 For information see www.errc.org.
 - 26 See as a recent example <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=2715> (download 14.02.2007).
 - 27 Art. 5 Council Directive 2000/43/EC.
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- Danish Technological Institute (ed.), Jens Henrik Haahr et al., "Explaining Student Performance. Evidence from the International PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS surveys," 2005, http://www.danishtechnology.dk/_root/media/19176%5FFinal%20report%20web%20version.pdf.
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