

THE IDENTITY OF GYPSY CHILDREN IN FAMILY FOSTER HOMES

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Abstract

There are gypsy children in institutional care who don't know their ethnicity at all; they are not in touch with their gypsy parents or other relatives, so they don't feel to be part of the gypsy culture. This often causes a chaos in their identity, what in the vast majority of cases persists to the adult age. They are raised by non-gypsy educators most of the time. The aim of this thesis is to answer a question whether it is necessary to work with Gypsy children in a different way than with non-gypsy children and whether it's necessary to develop and enhance their national and ethnic identity in the meaning of positive gypsy traditions.

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Introduction

Knowing of the personal identity is important for all of us. If we have wane sense of identity, there is also weak ability to face new events and problems in life. If the child has no sense of its own identity, it may happen, that child is overloaded with its own past and cannot think about the future.

According to the Law of social protection of children and social guardianship 305/2005, the children's home is defined as an institution of social services. It pro-

vides a care to children from birth to adulthood, or gaining independence, but the longest till 25 year of age. Under this Act, orphanage is replacing natural family environment for the child or alternative family environment. Child admission to the foster home can be based on the:

- Final court decision ordering institutional care
- An interim measure
- Final court decision imposing the educational measure

In an emergency cases, especially if the child found themselves without any care or if the life or health of the child is at risk, may be taken to a foster home without any documents. These documents is the office for child protection and social guardianship obliged to provide additionally.

Since January 1997, all foster homes are included under the competence of the Ministry of labour, social affairs and family. Transformation of foster homes college type to the foster family homes ran continuously and was legalized by adoption of the Law 305/2005 Law of social protection of children and social guardianship. Flawless operation of individual families in a transformed home warrants the fact, that in this form of education:

- Individualized approach of the educator to the child creates bigger platform for the cooperation with the biological family of the child, if there are appropriate conditions for such cooperation
- Is easier to stimulate real family atmosphere and running of the family, with all its characteristics
- As far as possible an individual and differentiated approach is secured, in order to prepare children for life in every aspect, including self-service works
- Children participate better and more often and they decide together with adults about the general atmosphere in the group.
- Big noise is completely removed
- Prevents constant running of children from group to group during the day and evening.

Personality of the social worker

The most basic principle of the social worker's job has to be an interest of the people. Help to the client can't be effective without the interest and social feeling. Social worker of the foster home is primarily protector of the child's right. Miklosko (2008) indicates 6 basic points of the job description of the social worker at foster homes.

1. Removal of the social isolation

For the avoidance of social isolation of the facility is important that public should be informed enough about the facility and the events. Public should also come to close contact with the facility, either through volunteers who can provide new long-lasting relationships and positive role models to the children, or close cooperation with the school or extracurricular organizations which children attend or may attend.

2. Creating a space for communication between the child and its biological family

Children from foster homes usually yearn for their biological parents openly or covertly. They want to see their parents or at least to be in contact with them and feel the acceptance of their biological family by surroundings. If this need of the personal integrity of child is not filled, it's resulting to educational problems and conflicts. Social worker should be aware of this (in the past very underestimated and neglected) fact and in the cooperation with the other members of the team do everything possible to help the child to cope with its conflicting feelings and work on an adequate feelings and safe contact with biological family.

3. Creating conditions for substitute family care

Substitute family care may be one of the solutions for the problem of abandoned children. It's indisputable, that such a form as a foster care or adoption is still maturing in Slovakia, compared with other industrialized countries.

4. Prevention

Prevention is vital job of social worker in close collaboration with the psychologist and special pedagogue inside the facility. This action can prevent internal and interpersonal conflicts.

5. Creating conditions for the labour integration of the child

In this case, social worker should be active together with the child after leaving the foster home.

6. Social reintegration

It's happening often, that child after leaving the foster home fails. In this case, there is often nobody close whom can ask for a help. If is young person after the leaving foster home in crisis, he/she should have the opportunity to find the social worker and other members of the team.

Slovak gypsies have traditionally lived in gypsy settlements. These were either the urban gypsy neighbourhoods which were located at the edges of cities, or gypsy camps and settlements outside the built-up area, mostly at least one to three kilometres distant from the towns and villages. In establishing these settlements the natural conditions played a significant role, particularly whether water, forest and building material were near and also if there is an opportunity for the barest livelihood in the surroundings.

As a result of assimilating educational state policy towards several generations of the Gypsies, which deepened social and educational deficit, decomposed their original values which were passed through generations – ten thousands of Gypsies in Slovakia barely finished primary education in the lower grades of elementary schools, but gradually more often in special schools. Several psychological and educational researches demonstrate that the shifting of gypsy children to special schools for mentally retarded children was unfounded, the reason was more likely language handicap associated with social deficits. Even during the period of transformation after the year 1989 state couldn't find the solution for this situation. There are still ten thousands of future unemployed graduates educated like this in special schools or special classes. They will become a burden for the society. Very slow are as well the steps in setting up the zero classes and using the gypsy assistants and other innovative and alternative teaching programs.

The main role for women in the family is to take care of children, their education, and also for the household. The man is the head of the family, the master; he is the one who decide how much a woman wants to have children. Gypsy family lives together, usually we can find three or four generations in one house. All the women in this family are involved in raising children, the oldest girls have to take care of their younger siblings. Respect and esteem enjoyed by mostly elderly family members. They are wise, giving advices. Causes of placing Roma children to foster homes were (not so long ago) attributed to the interventions of the majority. Children used to be taken from their families due to the parental criminality, the "bad care", for "poor sanitary conditions" in the family, etc. As a result of this situation

was that these children after leaving the children's home had nowhere to return, their biological family did not want them back, or the child didn't want to be integrated back into the family. The problem is that the integration of these children to the society was very difficult because of prejudices of the majority. There are two aspects of identity: personal identity and social identity. In the context with the gypsy population we must mention the national identity, which is included in the category of social identity.

A child brought up in a gypsy family is dependent on family whole life, either psychologically and materially, is not independent, cannot reach the individual personality. The result of this kind of parenting is called to be Gypsy, and gypsies themselves consider it the most precious heritage. Such gypsy ethnicity includes all elements of gypsy culture and form an indivisible unit (Sekyt 2003). One of the most important parts of being Gypsy is that the individual is aware of belonging to family and genus. The part of this awareness is preferring family members at the expense of other people who are not part of it, further respect of older family members, taking care of children and helpless family members.

Gypsy ethnicity and gypsy identity, terms so important for gypsies and their confidence are coming to the crisis these years. Many gypsies who want to live differently than in the unsatisfactory social conditions and in need (gypsy intelligence) cease to declare their ethnicity and they are rather approaching to the non-gypsy population. Many of them are going abroad for higher quality life. Young generation of gypsies have problem with where are they belonging, they don't hold the traditions, don't speak the language, so they are somehow sidelined from the community. But they are also not accepted by the society. These people usually do not know where they belong, where their place is and even if they don't realize it themselves, they are suffering by belonging nowhere.

Educator of gypsy children should bet on personality - but one that would develop the positive attributes of gypsy ethnicity as far as possible. Personality that would (with educator help) developed their gypsy identity with an effort to overcome the negative characteristics for which child could be at the beginning even admitted to foster home. This is important not only for the present but also for the future of a multicultural society.

Gypsy children are not different only by the colour of the skin, they have their specifics. They need to convey their culture, their ethnicity and this they cannot do with the help of their parents, so they need the help of the educators and social

workers, even if those are not of gypsy origin. Our society is whether we want it or not, insensitive to gypsy issues. We will never be able to protect gypsy children against a variety of insults and shouting. But we can prepare them for that and support them to create healthy gypsy identity.

Survey

The aim of the survey was to determine the view of gypsy children in foster homes to their ethnic identity, whether they are aware of their gypsy identity, who they really consider themselves to be.

Exploratory question: “How do the gypsy children living in foster homes see their cultural identity?”

Exploratory group consisted of 10 gypsy children living in the foster home in Bratislava aged 6 to 16 years, 7 boys and 3 girls. Further, research attended 9 educators (6 women, 3 men) aged 24 to 46 years from different foster homes family type who are attending specialization training for staff in children's homes and special schools in Methodological and Pedagogical Centre in Bratislava. Four respondents have secondary education, and 5 of them are university graduates. Interviews with the children lasted about 20 minutes, which was the limit (especially in small children) in which they managed to keep the attention, or were motivated with sweet reward.

Specific questions for children in foster homes:

1. How do you imagine your future? What would you like to be?
2. Can you tell me who you are? List the words that you can connect with your person.
3. What is your difference from the other children? What is unique about you? What are you good at?
4. What are your interests?
5. Do you feel to be Gypsy?
6. Who do you think are the gypsies? If somebody asked you who is gypsy, what would you answer?
7. Have you ever been ashamed for being Gypsy?
8. Is there anything you don't like about the gypsies?
9. What do you like on them at the other side?

Future

They had very similar picture about their future as their contemporaries. Most of the answers was that they want a good job and own family, although gypsy specifics is that they don't think much about the future, they live mostly in the present.

Uniqueness

This category includes activities that children enjoy and like to do. For boys, this is mainly a sport in which they feel special; it was confirmed by four respondents, 2 with table tennis, 2 with football. Further it was dance, computers, painting, singing etc.

Sense of the identity

All gypsy children whom we interviewed knew that they belong to gypsy ethnicity. All of these children have some contact with their biological family, or they remember a time when they lived in the family. But this doesn't mean that they fell to be gypsy. Some children never doubted that they are gypsy ethnicity.

Some children never doubted about their ethnicity. One respondent for the question if he feels to by gypsy answered without any hesitation: "Of course, I feel." In the next part of conversation he said: "I don't mind at all that I am a Gypsy." Also respondent's number 3, 7 and 10 are sure about their ethnicity and they feel to by gypsies.

When asked **what they like about gypsies**, we received many responses. 5 of them answered that they like music, singing songs, dancing, also they said that they like the gypsy laugh, eyes and trips. One of the children answered that he doesn't like anything about them, and one of the respondents liked the fact that they are begging.

I am a Gypsy, but...

For some children, we observed some doubts whether they feel to be gypsies; this aroused from the opinion that they want to have non-gypsy lifestyle in the future. Respondent no. 5 answered for the question, whether he feels to by Gypsy: "Yes, I feel, but..." but we could have seen some kind of awkwardness. Respondent no. 4 said: "Yes, I feel to by Gypsy, but different than the others. Some of the gypsies look like you can never recognize that they are gypsies; they look like white

people and live like white people. So this is what I want in the future: to be a Gypsy, but live like a white.” Another one answered: “I don’t know who I am. Probably I am a Gypsy.”

I feel to be Slovak

In the third group of the children, based on the answer, were children who didn’t feel to be gypsies. Respondent no. 8 answered for the question if she feels to be gypsy that she didn’t. Also for the question whether she was ever ashamed for being gypsy, she answered that never. Then she confirmed that even if she is considered to be gypsy nationality, she feels more to be Slovak than Gypsy. The biggest problem was with the respondent no.1. “Gypsy not at all, more Slovak”. With these issues he was suddenly very different, angry and conversation began to be very uncomfortable for him. For the next questions he answered: “don’t ask me. If I were a gypsy, they all would curse me.”

There is no clear answer for the exploratory question: “**How do they feel their ethnicity**”, because every child is individual. All of them didn’t doubt that they are gypsies. Most of them also felt to be gypsies, some of them had “but” which one of them couldn’t specify and the other said that he feels to be gypsy, but wants to live like white people. Two of them even said that they feel to be more Slovak than gypsy, one of them said that he doesn’t feel to be gypsy at all. Although the particularity of the Gypsies is that they do not care about their future and live mostly in the present, all child respondents would like to work in the future; three out of ten would like to have a family of their own. Gypsies are special with their musical talent and the talent for movement. 4 children out of ten feel to be exceptional in these areas, but also like to paint and sport. Children managed better to characterize positive aspects of the gypsies. Only one respondent answered that he liked nothing about the gypsies. As negative aspects of gypsies they stated noise, dirt, stealing, swearing, but 4 children responded that they do not mind anything at gypsies.

Specific questions for educators

1. Do you talk to the kids about their past, present and future?
2. Is work with gypsy different than with the other children? If yes, then what is the difference?
3. What is the difference between gypsy and non-gypsy children?

4. Do you think that Roma children are interested in their origins?
5. Who do you think should convey to them they are gypsies and how?
6. What information do you think these children certainly should know about the gypsies?
7. Do you think it would be appropriate to speak about the gypsies also with non-gypsy children? Would it be useful?
8. Do you think it would be useful for children if gypsy personal were employed?
9. Are you interested in these issues? Do you have enough information about this topic?

By analysis of interviews with the educators we identified the opinions of these subjects about the identity and ethnicity of gypsy children. It should be noted that originally 15 respondents were contacted, 6 of them refused to participate the talk about the subject. As a reason they answered: "Why to talk about this issue?" or "For God's sake, this no!" Respondents, who agreed to participate, found several features which is necessary to count with when you work with this ethnicity. The most common terms used by respondents in relation to the specifics of gypsy children were identified: temperament, temper, impulsivity, noise, lack of concentration, loss of their independence, the tendency of association, living and working in a group, but also physical talent, dance, musical talent, focusing on the present, emotion, unreliability, inferiority complexes, wanderlust, prone to lies, a different set of values, avoiding responsibilities, servility, but also kindness, different culture, different customs, earlier adolescence - especially in girls. Answers of the respondents for the question no.6 show that information about gypsies should be mostly positive, but there is no need to avoid the negative information too. All respondents agreed that children should know first of all about the history of the gypsies, the gypsy culture, the music, tales, dances and language. From the negative information they stated, that children should know about gypsies without job, living on social benefits. As a source of information four of them answered that it should be an educator, but also gypsy educator, biological parents and history teacher. However, one respondent noted that educators often have the same prejudices against gypsies like majority, further reinforced by the negative experience with the original families of the children from the foster home. So it should be rather external worker who can mediate information better than educators, mainly through discussions with children. Eight of nine respondents also think that to mediate information about gypsies is certainly beneficial, only one stated that this is not necessary. We believe that the survey results cannot be generalized and even it was not the aim

of our research. Although respondents opinions are very interesting and certainly useful for practice.

Recommendations for practice

- It is important that people, who work with gypsy children in the foster home, whether it is an educator or social worker, had acquired information about the gypsies. These workers should know about gypsy culture, about who the gypsies are, and also to know about their history. This would help tutor to create with children their identity, for example with reading them tales, speaking with them about their culture, and introducing them important personalities.

- Social worker could for example invite important gypsy personalities, organize discussion about the culture, and invite gypsy music bands or other culture attractions, to mediate a gypsy culture. Also should recommend a literature to the children and to the school.

- it's absolutely necessary to prepare children for that to be a Gypsy is a stigma, and in our society there are many prejudices towards gypsies. Children should know it and be prepared for it.

- To invite cooperation from gypsy educator. This person may be very important for children by helping them answer the questions. He/she can be somebody with whom they can identify. Great benefit can be that person especially for those children who spend the majority of time in the foster home, so they have no contact with community.

- The question of ethnic identity and everything that is included in this issue can be difficult for orientation also for educators and social workers, it is therefore necessary for people who work with gypsy children to create a support groups where they can talk about everything with colleagues or with professionals.

- Implement activities to assist in the application of gypsy youth in the labour market, start to provide advice to young people outside the school (e.g. courses German or English) and also highlight the need for organizations to create more job opportunities for gypsies.

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