

Gypsy Language in Portuguese Education

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In Portugal lives at least 40.000 Gypsies (it is registered) but probably their number is over 50.000 that makes up 5% of the population. It is very hard to give their exact number because there are many so-called travelling communities (e.g. circus community) among them who do not have permanent addresses. These “travellers” live in caravans and move from one town (or even country) to another several times a year.

In the academic year of 1997/98 the number of all students who attended primary and secondary school was 1.299.305 (population of Portugal is 9.800.000) in Portugal that includes the 5.930 Gypsy pupils. The rate of drop-outs in case of Gypsy students was much higher than in case of the majority society. The reasons for drop-outs were in order of importance the followings: being travellers so changing school all the time, no money for school, do not like attending school, illness, during schooltime have to accompany the parents at work, looking after the younger brothers and sisters, feeling scared at school because the norms of the school (and the other pupils) are far from the Gypsy's ones.

Portuguese researches on Gypsies do not mention language deficiencies at all. In Portugal all Gypsy children speak Portuguese (according to the Ministry of Education of Portugal) as well as children of the majority society so they are ready for school in this sense. In Portugal ethnic minority language problem does not exist therefore for example, there are no Gypsy-Portuguese bilingual schools at all. Today in Portugal both Gypsy children and parents do not speak Gypsy (it is said by the Ministry of Education but it is not really relevant as there are also Portuguese Gypsies who speak Gypsy language) and there is no need for teaching Gypsy language at primary school. Otherwise almost all the ethnic minority or immigrant children attend public schools in Portugal and none of them are studying in their own language. All non-Portuguese people in Portugal should speak Portuguese because they have schools only in this language. There are just some bilingual schools and the language of these ones are in most cases English, German and French. These are all private schools for well-off children. Gypsy children usually do not attend these schools.

There are just language courses in Gypsy language for Gypsy people but only in cultural terms. There are many integrated Gypsies who consider that Gypsy culture should be taken care of that includes Gypsy language, music, dancing, history etc. Any Gypsy people can attend these courses just as a hobby and these are organized mostly by foundations and schools.