Toy Libraries Conference

"Reducing the gap in early childhood education of Roma: Opportunities and obstacles for inclusion"

Short report

Toy Libraries Conference "Reducing the gap in early childhood education of Roma: Opportunities and obstacles for inclusion", held on 6th and 7th of June, gathered more than 80 participants. Librarians from 9 countries and 19 toy libraries, early childhood education experts as well as members of the international institutions and Serbian ministries had the opportunity to learn and exchange information and knowledge about inclusion in early childhood education and the progress made so far.

On day one, the conference was opened by Mr Nadir Redzepi, executive director of Roma Education Fund, and Mr. Zoran Jovanovic, Serbian country representative of the Central European Initiative. Ms Gordana Cvetkovic from Social Inclusion Unit of Ministry of Education in Serbia, gave an overview of the inclusion policies in Serbia, successes and obstacles the Unit has had so far.

Two keynote speakers engaged the Toy Library conference participants. Ms Tunde Kovac Cerovic from Philosophy Faculty in Belgrade gave overview on education challenges in the „post Decade period "(Decade for Roma Inclusion – 2005-2015). She presented the participants important insights into why education, and especially early childhood education, is important. Also, she shared the missing links and barriers in education policy areas (curriculum, textbooks, assessments, teachers, management and financing). She concluded with reminding the participants on the importance of participation, and that education for social change depends on it.

Ms Margaret Kernan from International Child Development Initiative talked about using a participatory approach in assuring the quality of services in toy libraries. She addressed the basics of quality for young children and the meaning of quality for them. The children understand their world

trough play, and she stressed the importance of toy libraries in supporting this developmental stage of children from marginalized communities. She provided participants with six aspects of quality of services that toy libraries provide. At the end the questions of measurements and improvement of quality have been addressed.

In the afternoon sessions Ms Szilvia Pallagy from Roma Education Fund gave an overview on the early childhood education model of REF. In addition, Mr Sasa Stevanovic from the MODS network (Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia) shared with participants the process of establishment, obstacles and aims of the MODS network as an example of good practice in networking of organizations. After this introduction, seven countries presented their toy libraries, success, impacts and obstacles during project implementation. A live discussion followed the presentation, enabling participants to understand and learn from each other experience.

On the second day, morning sessions were dedicated to the usage of toys, and different approaches to play with specific toys. Ms. Marta Keckes, toy expert, gave participants the opportunity to experience the world of play with different toys and expand the possibilities for using different toys in supporting children's development.

The Toy Library Guideline is a very important document for opening and running a toy library, so a specific session was dedicated to reviewing toy library guidelines. Participants gave their opinions and recommendations for the improvement of guidelines in order to be more adaptable to the situations in the Roma communities.

The last session was dedicated to discussing the possibilities for the formation of a Roma toy library network. Using a participatory workshop method, the participants addressed 4 key questions – benefits from the network, obstacles that can occur during formation, future aim of the network and steps in the process of formation.

Participants completed evaluation questionnaires at the end of the conference. Ms Sszilvia Pallagy from REF officially closed the Conference by reminding the lessons learned and future steps to be taken according to the discussions during the conference.