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# An approach to designing practical tools for educational actions with minority groups.

*AILINCAI Rodica*<sup>1</sup> & *WEIL-BARAIS Annick*<sup>2</sup>,

## Summary

This article stems from the paper presented, and ensuing debate, at the third Vietnamese-French psychology colloquy, on the changes affecting rural society (*Campagnes en transition – Environnement, Hommes, Cultures*), held in Hanoi on 27 at 28 November 2006. It looks at the schooling of children who belong to minorities and considers the current study considering how to prepare and evaluate a tool (a teaching kit<sup>3</sup>) for raising awareness among the Roma minorities living in Europe of the importance of schooling for their children. The principles underlying the design of this tool (its features in terms of content, flexibility/adaptability to different age groups and low cost) make it possible to argue that it could be tailored to other minorities which experience schooling difficulties which are similar in certain respects (at least in economic and practical terms) to those of Roma minorities (material difficulties, distance from school, etc).

**Key words:** Minorities – Schooling - Roma/Travellers - Scientific education - Parenting education

## 1. The education of minorities: a current cause for concern

Schooling and cultural development programmes for minorities and migrants are among the priority concerns of European and international institutions. Numerous projects have been put forward by a number of international bodies, ranging from teacher and mediator training in intercultural education to preschool, primary and secondary education syllabuses. Giving priority to intercultural teaching, these projects aim to promote greater equality of opportunity for these groups and to integrate them as well as possible into social and economic life. In this context, the education of their children is given particular attention, with the aim of improving their integration into the school system, while respecting their cultural identity.

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<sup>3</sup> This teaching kit project is part of the European project started by the Council of Europe on the "Education of Roma children in Europe", the aim of which is to implement Recommendation No. R (2000) 4 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the education of Roma/Gypsy children in Europe. Implementation of this recommendation, which concerns the 46 member states of the Council of Europe, is organised within an overall project encompassing several kinds of activities (training seminars, analyses of good practices, production of teaching materials, publications, etc).

After giving a reminder of activities relating to minorities in Vietnam, we shall take a look at those relating to the Roma populations of Europe, with which there are certain similarities. We shall then describe an ongoing innovative experimental activity which might be of interest to Vietnam, as it fits in with populations' interests, is adaptable, plays a training and cultural role and is inexpensive.

### **1.1 The Vietnamese context**

Like most developing countries, Vietnam now attaches great importance to improving the quality of education (Hardy A and Nguyen Van Chinh, 2004). Readers know better than we do how these activities are developing and progressing in Vietnam, but we shall nonetheless give the examples of some programmes run by various institutions and organisations with a view to the education of minorities:

- In June 2003, Vietnam embarked on a national action plan for education for all (EFA), defining four target areas for EFA<sup>4</sup>: the protection and education of children in their early years, primary education, lower secondary education and informal education. Where primary education is concerned, priority is given to providing access to affordable high-quality education for all children, including members of minorities, disadvantaged children and girls. The aim is to ensure that all children pursue the full five-year course and attain certain levels of learning, with a basic quality level achieved in all schools. Quality is, moreover, increasingly demanded by pupils' parents and, more generally, by Vietnamese society as a whole (Minister of Education and Training, 2003).
- *Aide et Action*<sup>5</sup>, which has been active in Vietnam since 2004, works in partnership with the local authorities of the province of Khanh Hoa. The main aim of its project is to prevent minorities from becoming marginalised and to foster the social integration of their children, raising parents' and children's awareness of schooling and hygiene and creating vital infrastructure, in conjunction with the education authorities concerned.
- UNICEF<sup>6</sup> and the Vietnamese government also carry out projects intended to promote access to schooling for minorities. Their aim is to increase community participation in school

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<sup>4</sup> The EFA programme was relaunched at the World Education Forum (26-28 April 2000) in Dakar, where participants reaffirmed the vision set out in the World Declaration on Education for All (adopted 10 years previously in Jomtien, Thailand) and adopted six regional frameworks for action. The second goal of the Dakar Framework is to ensure "that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality". The Dakar Framework asserts that "The heart of EFA activity lies at the country level".

<sup>5</sup> Founded in 1981, *Aide et Action* is an association which works for development through education and has no political or religious links. It is an association with "public interest" status and received Ministry of Education approval in 2006.

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF was set up in 1946 and encompasses a network of offices active in 161 countries worldwide. In general terms, it exists to protect the most disadvantaged children of the world and to help them to survive and to develop. Its only resources are private gifts, donations and legacies, the proceeds of sales of greeting cards and other products and voluntary grants from governments.

activities, including planning and supervision, through parent/teacher associations and school councils. Pupils who live too far away may board at the school in premises built jointly by parents, the community and the local authorities. UNICEF provides training and allowances for cooks and maintenance staff and pays for the purchase of beds, blankets and mosquito nets (Nettleton, 2005; UNICEF, 2006).

- *Enfants&Développement*<sup>7</sup> started its work helping street children and ethnic minorities in Vietnam in 1993. Its two latest projects are (1) "Education for ethnic minorities in the district of Bac Ha" (in the province of Lao Cai), a programme which began in April 1997 and continues today, training women from ethnic minorities as teachers, building and fitting out nursery classes and play areas, and improving hygiene in families and villages; and (2) "Development of young children in the ethnic minorities of northern Vietnam", an activity which began in 2003 and in the course of which the two main problems have been identified as lack of access to primary education for ethnic minorities and the low level of the education given to them (*Education&Développement*, 2003; 2005).
- *Mission Enfance*<sup>8</sup> has been working in Vietnam since 1991 to develop schools and to enable the poorest people to gain access to education. Priority is given to getting children from ethnic minorities in mountain areas into schools: some 80 schools have been built (including 50 primary schools), and wells have been dug (Lagourgue, 1993).

## 1.2 *The Roma in Europe*

The minority to which a lot of attention is given in Europe is the community of Roma and Travellers. This is a community approximately 8 million strong in Europe. Not much is known about them, and they are stereotyped very negatively, often being subjected to exclusion, segregation (to make no mention of the Gypsy extermination adopted by the Nazis during World War II). Among the oldest ethnic groups in Europe, Roma and Travellers have been present in all the countries of Europe for centuries. As a result of their very specific lifestyle and the conditions in which they live, Roma and Traveller children tend to have no contact at all with schools or related systems. Schools are not regarded as a means of education, emancipation and fulfilment, but, in contrast, as synonymous with loss of cultural identity and assimilation, and the community perceives them as an obstacle to its children's cultural development. The uncertain conditions in which most Roma/Traveller families live are often the main reason why the children

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<sup>7</sup> *Enfants&Développement* (E&D) is an international NGO (an association recognised as a charity) set up in 1984 and active in France and developing countries, endeavouring to improve the living conditions of the most disadvantaged children in terms of health, education and socioeconomic development. [www.enfantsetdeveloppement.org](http://www.enfantsetdeveloppement.org).

<sup>8</sup> *Mission Enfance*, set up in Monaco in 1991, is an apolitical, non-denominational NGO which, according to its articles of association, exists to "bring succour to children in distress in the world". Its articles of association were filed in France in the year of its foundation. It has support from the government of the Principality of Monaco, and Prince Albert of Monaco is its honorary president. The operational aim is to set up or consolidate local school systems, so that children in difficult regions effectively attend school.

do not manage to integrate into the school system. Various difficulties arise out of these conditions:

- practical problems. There is nowhere to do homework and no means of getting to school, essentially due to the consignment of Roma to ghettos, forced to live in places beyond the reach of public transport and off the schools map;
- financial difficulties. Many Roma families cannot afford the cost of transport (where any exists) or of books and school supplies; housing conditions often being uncertain, some Roma communities still have no electricity or running water;
- social and cultural problems. The Roma community's view of schools is often not very positive. If they are to be able to accept schools more readily, consideration needs to be given to the negative images and cultural stereotypes still found in ordinary language (Pierrot, 2005; Cotonnec, 1986), and reinforced by the bad experience of parents themselves, for whom school has often become synonymous with intolerance, rejection and difficulties in general. There is not only an element of conflict, but also a difference in the ways in which values and knowledge are passed on to young children (Bloch et al, 2005), with Roma achieving this through their actual lifestyle and through the stories told by the older generation.

Traditionally, for instance, Roma children do their learning outside school. The informal education they receive - mainly know-how acquired within their own family - is very remote from, or even conflicts directly with, the knowledge learned in schools. Children enjoy a degree of freedom in the different communities, and in many cases it is they who take the decisions, or do the research for their parents' decisions, on matters including schooling. If a child refuses to go to school, its parents will have virtually no influence over this decision; if the reverse is the case and the child decides to attend school, the parents will not stand in the way and the child will gain a fairly solitary experience of school. It is still necessary for such children to be given the opportunity to enrol, continue to attend and obtain respect for their person and their culture, something that is all the more difficult for the minority nature of their culture, for which there is little respect. Parents are willing to entrust to a teacher the task of teaching a child to read, write and do arithmetic, but they never in any circumstances agree to have their children educated by representatives of the dominant culture. Moreover, parents are little inclined to send young children, whose education they regard as primarily a matter for the family, to what seems like an alien and often threatening (physically and culturally) school. The life of a Rom/Traveller almost always centres on the family, the base unit of social organisation and the financial and educational unit (Berthier, 1979). It is the family, in uncertain and shifting situations, that offers permanence and stability. The individual is never alone and cannot be isolated. In this context, the education of children is collective. Three or four generations live together, and the child becomes socialised within the family unit, which offers cohesion and security.

Failure to attend school or failure at school by children from Roma communities cause concern at European level, justifying much of the action taken in respect of these communities.

While the first text on Roma issues was adopted by the Council of Europe in 1969, it is in the early 1990s that the international community started to pay close attention to Roma issues, especially to immediate human rights concerns, including protection from discrimination and persecution, and legal representation. Some examples will now be given of resolutions adopted by the European Parliament<sup>9</sup>, which have encouraged the European Commission<sup>10</sup> and the EU member states<sup>11</sup> to start numerous studies and programmes relating to this population:

- the resolution of 16 March 1984 on education for children whose parents have no fixed abode;
- the resolution of 17 April 1989 on illiteracy and education for children whose parents have no fixed abode;
- the resolution of 13 July 1995 on discrimination against Roma and Sinti;

The most recent text about the education of Roma children date from the year 2000: Recommendation (2000) 4 on education of roma/Gypsy Children in Europe, This recommendation is the most specific and relevant to the topic because it provides the guiding principles of an education policy for Roma children in Europe, setting out priorities in terms of structures, curricula and teaching material, recruitment and training of teachers, information, research and assessment, consultation and co-ordination. This text recalls the fundamental text adopted by the Council of the European Union of 1989 on School Provision for Gypsy and Traveller Children stressing that it is urgently necessary to have a text covering all of the member states of the Council of Europe (Ailincai & Aman, 2006).

The aims of policy on educating these minorities have been set in consultation with these communities' representatives, so as to ensure that the culture and lifestyle of Roma are respected. Given the transnational nature of the community, present in every state of Europe, syllabuses are drawn up with an international dimension. This makes the resultant schooling programmes for Roma children interesting to examine. A particular question is how minorities'

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<sup>9</sup> The European Parliament is the parliamentary body of the European Union (EU), which has, since 1979, been directly elected every five years by EU citizens. Together with the Council of Ministers, it comprises the legislative branch of the European institutions. The European Parliament sits in Strasbourg, while its committees meet in Brussels. Its secretariat is based in Luxembourg.

<sup>10</sup> The European Commission, set up in January 1958, currently comprises 27 Commissioners. Its main task is to suggest and implement Community policies. It is independent of member states' governments but is answerable to the European Parliament, which may censure it. The Commission is appointed for five years and is based in Brussels.

<sup>11</sup> The 27 member states of the European Union have a total population of almost 500 million people, in an area of 3,930,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The European Union, an intergovernmental, supranational union now with 27 states, was established on 7 February 1992, when the Treaty on European Union was signed in Maastricht by the 12 states which were then members of the European Economic Community (EEC).

cultural characteristics are taken into account so as to design an education which prepares individuals for productive exchanges with other cultures. This is what aroused our interest.

## **2. Design of a tool geared to work with Roma minorities**

The general idea behind the tool that we designed, with Council of Europe support, is that minorities should be respected not only for ethical reasons and because of their contribution to humankind as a whole, but also so as to enable them to play their role in the cultural, technical, economic, etc., exchanges.

Having noted how often gypsy communities do not take kindly to the presence of aliens, we felt that they would be readier to accept the presence of educational material, especially if this made activities possible which were meaningful in the context of day-to-day life. This is why we opted for a teaching kit, not only easy to carry, but also inexpensive, meeting the spatial and financial constraints that gypsy communities are known to face.

The mediator has the task of explaining how to use the tool. In such a context, the adults are expected gradually to start thinking in the ways required for the activities the children are asked to carry out, or at the very least to attach value to these. As the school shares this knowledge and these values, the joint activities by adults and children made possible by the teaching kit would prepare the children for school attendance.

### **2.1 A tool for introducing young children to science**

Science is the field chosen on the basis that, because of its claim to universality, it is the best area for bringing together communities which may operate on the basis of very different values. Our idea is that, scientific explanations being essentially transcultural, working on them would make it possible to transcend cultural particularity, with the sciences offering ideal ground for socialisation, meaning a sharing of values which apply across different communities.

The tool that has been designed is for children old enough to begin their compulsory schooling (aged from five to eight). The kit is suitable for use within the family, being designed to raise interest within the family circle in the knowledge which tends to be passed on at school. We expect families, once their interest has been aroused by the use of such a tool, to adopt it as a means of acquiring useful knowledge and to take a new view of the educational facilities available outside the Roma community.

The activities have been designed to enable children to develop the basic skills (classifying, comparing, interpreting pictures, writing through pictures, counting, drawing, colouring, associating, assembling, observing, measuring, experimenting, etc) they will need in order to adapt to primary schooling (Council of Europe, 2006).

A first prototype of the tool has been designed (see figure 1). This is a kit containing a collection of materials appropriate for children aged between five and eight and not attending school. They

can use the contents to conduct easy experiments on matters connected with concerns close to their own environment.



Examples of materials in the kit:

- magnifying glasses to examine small frames containing insects such as butterflies and ants, and grains;
- items that float or flow, gloves;
- electric wire, bulbs, diodes, batteries – both new and taken apart;
- geometric shapes, etc.

Figure 1. The prototype teaching kit

These activities were chosen for their immediate usefulness in daily life, some for adults and others for children, stimulating and/or facilitating interaction between the family members involved.

## **2.2 The principles followed for assembling the teaching kit**

Several basic principles underlying the decisions made on the contents of the kit and the activities suggested by means of activity sheets:

- conformity with school syllabuses - the aim is to enable children to acquire some, at least, of the knowledge and know-how prescribed in syllabuses, making it easier for them to integrate into schools;
- independence and supervision - some of the activities are for children on their own, while others are to be carried out with guidance; the aim is to inform the adults of educational content beyond reading writing and arithmetic, and to make the children aware of the benefits they can derive from adults' assistance in acquiring new knowledge;
- practical usefulness and significance - the activities relate to practices which concern the minority (obtaining clean water, using energy carefully, easier or more economical production, etc); they move from the immediate ("what purpose does that serve?") to ever more complex issues leading to questions relating to meaning ("how can we...?", "why...?"). The aim is to raise awareness of the usefulness of what is learnt and the benefits of the various elements of the knowledge (benefits for oneself and for one's whole group);
- inexpensiveness - as recommended by Liègeois (1986), the activities make use of inexpensive material usually available in the household: lemons, copper, buckets, sand, etc;

- clarity of instructions - possible experiments are described on activity sheets based mainly on pictures and drawings, most of the adults concerned being illiterate;
- robustness of the material - this is vital, given the places and conditions of use (yard, kitchen, while younger brothers and sisters are being looked after, etc.); activity sheets are therefore made of material that can withstand being twisted or getting damp.

### **2.3 First prototype of the teaching kit**

The first prototype that we designed offers some 20 activities, amongst them growing plants, observing animals, making a home-made battery, making a torch, understanding how electricity is generated from wind power, making a water filter to remove impurities, learning how to purify water and make it drinkable, etc. Figure 2 shows an example of an activity.

## **3. Evaluation of the teaching kit**

### **3.1 The objectives of evaluation**

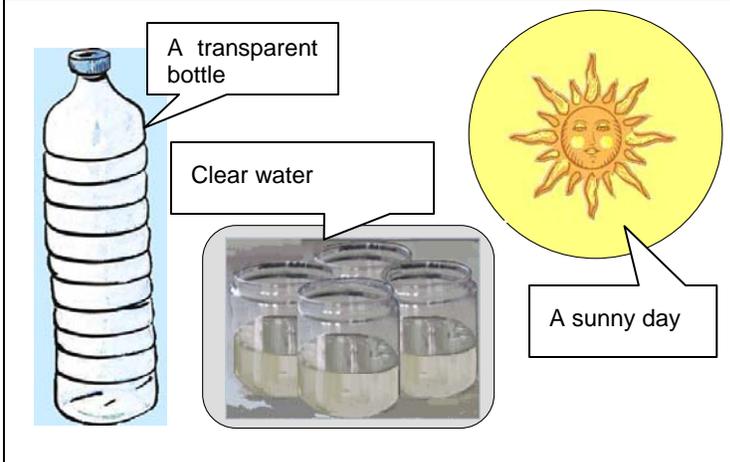
There are three aims:

1. to appraise the acceptability of the material to the minorities concerned and the ensuing activities;
2. to specify what kind of back-up is necessary to enable adults to use the material independently with their children;
3. to appraise the impact the teaching kit has on the plan to get children into schools.

Where acceptability is concerned, we observe what has happened to the material between each visit by a mediator, and we obtain participants' opinions of it when we meet them; we also analyse the exchanges between adults and children when the kit is in use. The analysis of the mediator's practice is based on a study of the exchanges at the various meetings (presentation of the material and follow-up of its use). The impact the teaching kit has on the plan to get children into schools is appraised on the basis of parents' comments about the school and the knowledge taught, their plans for schooling and for helping their children, and the determination they express in this respect. In very general terms, we have taken a line which combines an ethnographic approach and an analysis of social interaction.

### **3.2 Population concerned and conduct of the study**

The current study is being carried out in three European countries, in each case over a six-month period. The sample studied comprises 30 Roma families with children aged between five and eight who are not attending school: 10 settled families (living in Romania), 10 families who live in Bulgaria and 10 families with a nomadic lifestyle (living in France).



A transparent bottle

Clear water

A sunny day

(This activity follows on from other activities on the theme of water.)

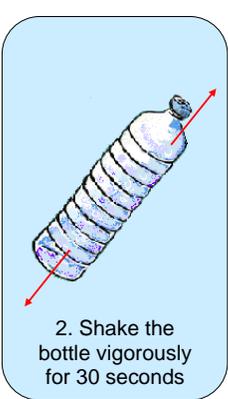
**Material:**

- empty transparent bottles (made of glass or plastic) washed in drinking water;
- clear water that has already been either left to settle or filtered (using a water filter made during a previous activity);
- sunlight (choose a bright sunny day).



Early in the morning

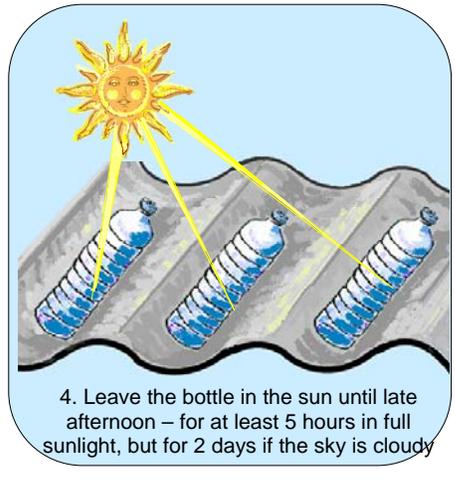
1. Half-fill the bottle and screw the top back on



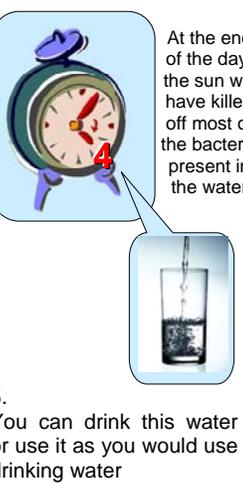
2. Shake the bottle vigorously for 30 seconds



3. Top up the bottle with clear water



4. Leave the bottle in the sun until late afternoon – for at least 5 hours in full sunlight, but for 2 days if the sky is cloudy



At the end of the day, the sun will have killed off most of the bacteria present in the water

5. You can drink this water or use it as you would use drinking water

**What to do:**

1. Half-fill the bottle and screw the top back on;
2. Shake the bottle well so that the water is oxygenated, which will help the ultraviolet light from the sun to kill the microorganisms in the water.
3. Top up the bottle with clear water.
4. Lay the bottle on a roof or in some other place exposed to the sun.
5. Leave the bottle in the sun until late afternoon - for at least five hours if it is in full sunlight. Leave it for two days if the sky is cloudy.
6. At the end of the day the sun will have killed off most of the bacteria in the water.
7. The water can then be drunk or otherwise used as you would use drinking water.

**Drinking water:**  
The sun has killed the bacteria, and the water is fit to drink once it has been boiled.

**III. By the end of the activity the child should be capable of...**

1. distinguishing between clear and drinking water;
2. knowing the stages of the process for treating water through solar action;
3. theorising and testing these theories;
4. conducting simple experiments.

Figure 2. An extract from activity 9: Solar treatment of water

The families have been chosen on the grounds of their children's schooling record (based on information obtained from the head of their local school, who identified them as either not attending or attending only intermittently), after agreement by the family and with the support of the child concerned, following a personalised presentation of what was involved. It is in fact vital to get the child interested in participating, given the place that he or she occupies within the family (the parents take his or her wishes into account and try to meet these).

The material is shown to families on the first visit, and participants who volunteer are helped with their first experiments (see figure 3). There are two Roma mediators in each country who supervise the children, making between one and three visits per week (one a week for the first two months, two a week for the next two, and three a week in the final two months). This gradual and regular increase in the activities supervised by a mentor from outside the family is designed to prepare children for the regular rhythm of daily school attendance. As the material is left at their disposal, the mediator suggests independent activities for the periods between his or her visits.



Figure 3. Photograph taken in Romania (the facilitator, in the centre, explains the teaching kit to a mother and her child, with another two children in the background looking on)

The various activities carried out and things done are recorded in a book which enables both child and parents to realise all that has been learned, provides useful material for discussion with the mediator and/or research worker and will subsequently tell the teacher of the class to which the child is admitted about the skills the child has developed.

### **3.3 The pilot study**

We are only including in this article some of the information stemming from the first pilot study, which covered three family groups, each very different from the others in terms of the persons present at meetings when teaching kit activities were carried out. The first group comprised between five and nine persons, with four or five children present with a grandmother and grandfather, the other adults attending irregularly. The second group consisted of a grandmother and her daughter with two children, other adults and other children were present at certain times,

but did not seem at all involved in the activities. The third group comprised a grandmother and eight children; another two adults were also present, but played no part in the activity (the two men were asleep). Obviously, there were times during the day of visits when the groups were far larger.

The three groups were met several times (four meetings were the maximum), with from one to three months between the meetings, depending on availability. On the day of each visit, some time was devoted to use of the teaching kit (approximately 40 minutes), with the rest of the day taken up by various activities and discussions, with numerous opportunities to observe group practices and customs.

During the pilot study, the mediator visiting families was the research worker. All action taken by the mediator was recorded with a view to subsequent critical analysis of the practice adopted. This analysis will be used when mediator training is designed and introduced for the experimental study.

First meetings with these families were generally very difficult, and we had to call on numerous intermediaries (the local primary teacher, a doctor who had treated them, the priest, a neighbour, the mayor, etc). Once the obstacle of the first visit had been overcome, contacts were much easier, with people showing some interest in our arrival and the activities on offer. Conversations took place in the predominant language (Romanian)<sup>12</sup>.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The data analysed relate to interaction during use of the teaching kit. This interaction is polyadic, and we separate out the exchanges involving the research worker and the adults of the group, the research worker and the children, and the adults of the group and the children. Several systems of analysis are used. The aim is to look at the positions occupied and functions performed by the various partners, as well as supervisory activity, forms of co-operation and building together, and in very general terms, oral exchanges with a view to knowledge building. The other aim is to identify and characterise the activities carried out, any obstacles that arise and the knowledge that is being built up. We therefore use the same analysis models used to good advantage in previous work (Ailincăi, 2005; Ailincăi & Weil-Barais, 2006; François & Weil-Barais, 2003; Pourtois, 1979): speech acts, content of exchanges, distance, interactive style, activities, etc. We also plan to take into account non-verbal indications of interest in the activity (what people look at, the distance they keep from the items, their gestures, etc).

Generally speaking, adults' and children's involvement in the activities on offer is regarded as an indicator of their possible support for the schooling plan to which the activities lead.

During the experimental study, the aforementioned analyses will be supplemented by an analysis of the discussions with parents, children and some of the other parties involved (primary teacher,

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<sup>12</sup> The research worker/facilitator's mother tongue.

the community's Rom mediator, if there is one). Such discussions show how much importance the parents attach to schooling: more often than not the only benefit of schooling is thought to be the obtaining of the primary education certificate, which is required for certain useful purposes, such as enrolment at a driving school. The discussions also show whether people "do as they say", whether theories tally with practices. Some discussions show that young mothers wish their child to attend school, but that this remains wishful thinking (the social and financial reasons already mentioned certainly continuing to constitute almost insurmountable obstacles).

#### **4. First results and discussion**

Initial results suggest that the teaching kit enjoys strong support in the minority communities where it was put to the test. The adults take part in the activities, at first out of personal interest, but then so that they can "tutor" their child during activities. Analysis of the recordings shows that, when mothers and grandmothers (the latter play a very prominent role in family and community life) provide help, they tend to imitate the expert tutor by demonstrating, asking questions and waiting for replies.

These first observations encourage us to develop our research concerning the programmes of parental education in direction of Roma families

While families in the majority population contribute to their children's education (helping with homework), and while training programmes help them to "do better", we may suppose that a training programme is needed to initiate families in minority communities into a previously unknown practice. Thus it is desirable for the mediators to supply models of "good practice" for this inexperienced group, by which we mean good practice in helping children to acquire knowledge, involving both the necessary skills (dividing their attention, memorising, understanding interrelationships, etc) and the requisite intellectual processes (classifying, interrelating, comparing, discussing, etc).

The results also suggest that strong support for the project comes from the children. This may be attributable to the "success-oriented method" developed through the teaching kit, with the child being praised for what he or she does know, without being penalised for anything done badly (Cotonnec, 1986). In the specific context of the Roma community, the tool which we have created enables families not to feel directly challenged or called into question for not sending their children to school. Their involvement in the use of the teaching kit is a matter of free choice, both for them and for their children. The groups we met really got to grips with the questions associated with the material placed at their disposal; they took steps that were new to them, making use of their own resources and deciding on the degree of involvement that suited them (the scenes that they agreed to let us film with a miniature digital camera bear witness to this). This confirms the importance of mediation tools which make it possible to keep within bounds the feelings of rejection and/or suspicion inevitably aroused when cultures clash too starkly, and to transcend such clashes and focus on a process of learning. The tool not only smoothes relations

between the mediator, representing the majority culture, and the members of the minority culture affected, but also provides means of carrying out activities which are worthwhile in the light of schools' expectations and the minority populations' concerns, as well as introducing knowledge of universal value (the benefits of which have never been disputed). It seems likely that the fairly favourable reception given to us has largely been due to the careful balance that we have struck between the requirements of the school and those of the community. Of course more details need to be given of the characteristics of facilitators' practice and of the arrangements for their training. It is now realised that the value of educational tools very much depends on the use that the educators make of them.

It will be noted that the help we offer parents is not based on prescriptive ideas, and in this it is in line with the proposals of Pourtois & Desmet (1997). The educational challenge is to raise awareness among parents and children of the benefits of the knowledge usually transmitted by schools, so that they take a positive attitude to the education available, while at the same time changing the way in which the majority population (and certain teachers) regard the performances and abilities of the children from minorities. These are all essential parts of learning: an interest in knowledge objects among children and their families and a welcoming and understanding attitude to the children by teachers (Weil-Barais, 2005).

Different minorities' specific cultural characteristics (lifestyle, acquisition and passing on of knowledge, religion, relationships, etc) make it necessary to design specific programmes for the activity sectors to be covered, or for activities tried and tested in other contexts and other communities to be adjusted. There are certain similarities between the minorities of Vietnam and the Roma minorities of Europe, making us think that it might be a worthwhile exercise to design tools geared to the particular situation in Vietnam.

While the Vietnamese government does give priority to education, it is a formidable challenge to provide minority communities with a quality education, in view of the major obstacles, both geographical and linguistic (Guérin et al, 2003). There are 54 ethnic groups living in Vietnam, and almost 10 million people, 15% of the total population, are members of minorities, most, although not all, of them living in the mountainous regions of the north and centre of the country. Many live close to the borders with Laos, China and Cambodia. Their children frequently have to walk for hours to get to school. While bilingual education does exist, it is not universally available. The school attendance rates of children from minority groups are well below the national average, to some extent because of linguistic obstacles, but also because they often live in the most remote and poorest parts of the country. These reports justify that we are offering to transpose and adapt our tool (the teaching kit) for the minorities of Vietnam.

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