

The role of the Romani language in the educational inclusion of Roma children and young people: plurilingual education in action

Policy guidelines (revised August 2025)



Author
David Little
Academic Co-ordinator
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French version

Le rôle de la langue romani dans l'inclusion scolaire des enfants et des jeunes Roms : l'éducation plurilingue en action. Quelques lignes directrices (révisées en août 2025)

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Council of Europe
F-67075
Strasbourg Cedex
Email: education@coe.int.

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Helena Sadílková, Head of Romani Studies Seminar, Charles University, Prague

Diana Sima, Educational advisor and teacher of Romani

Zuzana Bodnárová, Romani Project, University of Graz

This revised version was prepared by David Little, Academic Co-ordinator of the Romani-Plurilingual Policy Experimentation

Executive summary

Despite the Council of Europe's decades-long engagement with Roma issues, the educational inclusion of Roma children and young people continues to present major challenges to member states. Successive Council of Europe recommendations are clear about the principles that should shape policy and the outcomes that policy implementation should achieve. They do not, however, concern themselves with those aspects of policy that shape classroom practice. This document addresses that gap, outlining new ways of managing the educational inclusion of Roma children and young people that are based on the Council of Europe's concept of plurilingual education. Its proposals have implications for the educational inclusion of other linguistic and cultural minorities.

The approach adopted is inspired by five principles that underpin the Council of Europe's work in education generally and language education in particular:

- ▶ all residents in the Council of Europe's member states enjoy the same right to an education that is designed to prepare them for active participation in democratic society;
- ▶ the social, educational and linguistic integration of minorities is a two-way process that should have positive consequences for the majority as well as the minority population;
- ▶ teaching approaches should seek to develop the individual learner's capacity to act as an autonomous social agent;
- ▶ language education should seek to foster the development of integrated plurilingual repertoires, taking account of all languages present in a given institution – the language of instruction, curriculum languages and the home and heritage languages of learners from linguistic minorities.

The document:

- ▶ recapitulates the Council of Europe policy regarding the education of Roma children and young people;
- ▶ summarises the implications of the Council of Europe's view that the integration of minorities should be a two-way process;
- ▶ provides a brief overview of the highly variable linguistic profiles of Roma communities;
- ▶ explains the pedagogical implications of two key Council of Europe concepts:
 - the (language) learner as an autonomous social agent;
 - plurilingual and intercultural education;

- ▶ identifies five general principles to guide the educational inclusion of Roma children and young people;
- ▶ summarises the results of the Romani-Plurilingual Policy Experimentation, a three-year project (2022-2025) of the Council of Europe's Education Department, which piloted the pedagogical approach proposed in these guidelines.

1. The educational inclusion of Roma children and young people: Council of Europe policy

The Council of Europe has been committed to the educational inclusion of Roma for more than 50 years. In 1969, Recommendation 563¹ of the Consultative Assembly (forerunner of the Parliamentary Assembly) urged governments to take measures to eradicate discrimination against "Gypsies and other travellers" and included education for Gypsy and traveller children and adults among its many other provisions.

The Committee of Ministers Recommendation No. R (2000) 4² on the education of Roma/Gypsy children in Europe recognised: "an urgent need to build new foundations for future educational strategies towards the Roma/Gypsy people in Europe, particularly in view of the high rates of illiteracy or semi-literacy among them, their high drop-out rate, the low percentage of students completing primary education and the persistence of features such as low school attendance". The recommendation noted that: "the problems faced by Roma/Gypsies in the field of schooling are largely the result of long-standing educational policies of the past". This point was repeated in Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)4,³ which noted that such policies: "can lead either to assimilation or to segregation of Roma and Traveller children at school on the grounds that they were 'socially and culturally handicapped'".

Most recently, Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)4⁴ on Roma youth participation, has drawn attention to: "the structural racism, inequities and policy gaps that member States need to address in order to ensure substantive participation, representation and inclusion of young Roma people in public and political life" and called on governments of member states to: "ensure substantive, fair and systematic participation, representation and inclusion of young Roma people in all spheres of society and decision-making processes and structures that impact their lives at the local, national and international levels". Although education is just one of the "spheres of society" referred to, the successful educational inclusion of Roma is an inescapable precondition for the effective implementation of the measures set out in the appendix to the recommendation.

1. See, <https://go.coe.int/jUxfk>.
2. See, <https://go.coe.int/8qw7b>.
3. See, <https://go.coe.int/Xduwm>.
4. See, <https://go.coe.int/72oJB>.

More general recommendations of the Committee of Ministers also have clear implications for the educational inclusion of Roma children and young people. For example, Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)4,⁵ on strengthening the integration of children of migrants and of immigrant background, urges that member states support the development of their proficiency in the language of schooling, which might also include: “the acquisition and maintenance of their mother tongue”. Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)13⁶ on ensuring quality education, is similarly applicable to Roma: quality education “gives access to learning to all pupils and students, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, adapted to their needs as appropriate”. Recommendation CM/Rec(2014)⁷ on the importance of competences in the language(s) of schooling for equity and quality in education and for educational success is also relevant: “... The right to education can only be fully exercised if the learners master the specific linguistic rules that are applied in schools and are necessary for access to knowledge.”

Despite these and other recommendations, problems remain, including those identified in 2006 by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities:⁸ “The Advisory Committee has repeatedly criticised practices of segregation of Roma students and welcomed efforts to end such practices. Other problems encountered are the bullying of Roma children by other children, or even by teachers, inappropriate and culturally biased tests used in the educational systems, the lack of recognition of the Romani language in schools.” The Advisory Committee also acknowledged the crucial role to be played by Romani: “The importance of teaching of and through the medium of the Romani language is increasingly discussed in State Reports and in the Opinions of the Advisory Committee as a necessary element of the efforts to ensure access to education for the Roma.”

5. See, <https://go.coe.int/5bOEv>.

6. See, <https://go.coe.int/4UOEv>.

7. See, <https://go.coe.int/QPplM>.

8. See, <https://go.coe.int/jseb1>.

2. The integration of minorities: a two-way process

The European Cultural Convention (1954)⁹ commits the Council of Europe to the protection of linguistic and cultural diversity, and this provides it with a further reason to work for the educational, social and linguistic inclusion of Roma children and young people. Romani language, history and culture are intrinsic to the various Roma communities of Europe, but they are also part of Europe's larger linguistic, historical and cultural heritage. It is widely recognised that the educational inclusion of Roma children and young people requires that Romani language, history and culture play a role in their schooling as a matter of respect and equality of esteem. It is much less widely recognised, however, that the Council of Europe's understanding of integration as a reciprocal, two-way process¹⁰ entails that where instruction in Romani language, history and culture is provided for Roma children and young people, it should also be available to their non-Roma peers. In the absence of such availability, the teaching of Romani language, history and culture is an instrument of segregation rather than integration.

The inclusion of Roma children and young people, however, should not be seen simply as a matter of providing Romani language classes. A policy of educational inclusion implies openness to diversity of ethnicity, culture and language; all classrooms should be spaces where all learners can express and, in some cases, discover their identities. This is the essence of plurilingual education. Roma children and young people whose home language is a variety of Romani should have opportunities to use that language to support their learning in all areas of the curriculum (see Section 6 below, "Plurilingualism as an overarching educational goal").

9. See, <https://go.coe.int/klde0>.

10. See, for example, Council of Europe (2008), White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, "Living together as equals in dignity", Strasbourg: <https://go.coe.int/dAHoW>.

3. The variable status of the Romani language in Roma communities and the variable proficiency of Roma children and young people in the language of schooling

Linguistically, Roma communities fall into three broad categories:

- ▶ those that have lost the Romani variety spoken by earlier generations;
- ▶ those in which older members of the community still use Romani on a daily basis, whereas children and young people hear and understand Romani but choose not to use it in their daily lives;
- ▶ those that have retained a variety of Romani as their domestic and community language.

Whatever their relation to the Romani language, Roma children and young people fall into three broad categories as regards the language of schooling:

- ▶ those for whom the language of schooling presents no difficulties;
- ▶ those who speak a non-standard variety of the dominant language and thus need help to become proficient in the (standard) language of schooling;
- ▶ those who lack proficiency in the language of schooling, perhaps as a result of recent migration.

Thus, education systems must find ways of responding to one or more of nine possible linguistic profiles.

4. From policy to classroom practice

The appendix to Committee of Ministers Recommendation No. R (2000) 4¹¹ includes a number of guiding principles regarding the need for flexible structures, curriculum and teaching material, the recruitment and training of teachers, the need to monitor and evaluate whatever measures are taken and the need for consultation and co-ordination. These are self-evident requirements, but the question remains: given the diversity of linguistic profiles that must be accommodated, how are principles to be translated into successful practice? The educational goals of the more general recommendations cited above prompt the same question. According to Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)13,¹² for example, quality education: "develops each pupil's and student's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential and encourages them to complete the educational programmes in which they enrol"; it also: "enables pupils and students to develop appropriate competences, self-confidence and critical thinking to help them become responsible citizens and improve their employability". But how exactly does quality education do these things? These and related questions can be answered with reference to two key concepts that underlie the Council of Europe's approach to language education: the (language) learner as an autonomous social agent and plurilingualism as an overarching educational goal.

11. See, <https://go.coe.int/8qw7b>.

12. See, <https://go.coe.int/Xff2k>.

5. The (language) learner as an autonomous social agent

In accordance with its commitment to human rights and democratic governance, the Council of Europe has always promoted learner-centred approaches to education. This explains the interest of early modern-languages projects in learner autonomy¹³ and self-assessment.¹⁴ It also explains why Council of Europe instruments designed to support the development of curricula, teaching materials and assessment instruments focus not on the language to be learned but on the communicative needs of the individual learner. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001)¹⁵ “views users and learners of a language primarily as ‘social agents’, i.e. members of society who have tasks ... to accomplish”.¹⁶ Accordingly, the CEFR defines language proficiency in terms of language use: what the user/learner can do at successive levels; the use of “can do” descriptors explicitly associates language proficiency with individual agency. Although the CEFR does not say how languages should be taught, it assumes that: “the language learner is in the process of becoming a language user”.¹⁷ In other words, there is a strong presumption that spontaneous interactive use of the target language will play a central role in teaching and learning.

The Council of Europe developed the concept of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) in parallel with the CEFR to provide language learners with a tool that would help them to manage their own learning and thus become autonomous. The ELP has three obligatory components: a language passport in which learners record and regularly update their experience of learning and using languages other than their mother tongue; a language biography that provides a reflective accompaniment to learning; and a dossier in which learners collect evidence of their developing proficiency. Learners use checklists of “I can” descriptors arranged according to the communicative activities and proficiency levels of the CEFR to identify learning targets and self-assess learning progress and achievements.

13. Holec H. (1979), *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, Council of Europe, Strasbourg.
14. Oskarsson M. (1978), *Approaches to Self-assessment in Foreign Language Learning*, Council of Europe, Strasbourg.
15. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, <https://go.coe.int/cZcU7>.
16. CEFR, p.9.
17. Ibid., p.43.

Versions of these instruments already exist for Romani. The Council of Europe's Curriculum Framework for Romani (CFR) was launched at a seminar in Strasbourg in 2007 and published in a slightly revised version in 2008. The CEFR was developed to provide: "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks etc. across Europe":¹⁸ the CFR is designed to fulfil the same functions for Romani. Based on the first four proficiency levels of the CEFR (A1, A2, B1, B2), it defines proficiency in relation to 11 themes: Myself and my family; The house/caravan and its activities; My community; Roma crafts and occupations; Festivals and celebrations; At school; Travel and transport; Food and clothes; Time, seasons and weather; Nature and animals; and Hobbies and the arts. Also in 2008, the Council of Europe published two versions of the ELP, for learners of Romani aged 6-11 and 11-16. The checklists of "I can" descriptors in these ELPs are based on the 11 themes of the CFR.¹⁹ From 2011 to 2013 the QualiRom project, funded by the European Union and hosted by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), developed teaching/learning materials based on the CFR in six Romani varieties/ dialect clusters: Arlje, East Slovak, Finnish, Gurbet, Lovara and Kalderas.²⁰ From 2015 to 2025, further support was provided by the ECML's QualiRom Training and Consultancy. Two-day seminars were held in Slovenia (July 2015, March 2019), Serbia (September 2017) and Slovakia (April 2018) and a half-day seminar in Austria (May 2016); during and after the Covid pandemic, online seminars were held for Greece (October 2020, March 2023) and Croatia (November 2021).

Thus, the Council of Europe already supports the teaching and learning of varieties of Romani with instruments that focus on language use and are designed to support the development of social agency and learner autonomy.

18. CEFR, p.1.

19. The CFR and the two ELPs are available in seven languages from the Council of Europe's website: <https://go.coe.int/Roch1>.

20. Available at <https://www.ecml.at/Resources/PageQualiRom>.

6. Plurilingualism as an overarching educational goal

The CEFR distinguishes between multilingualism as the presence of two or more languages in a community and plurilingualism as the individual's capacity to communicate in two or more languages. It also distinguishes between individual multilingualism and plurilingualism. Individual multilingualism is the result of teaching, learning and using a number of languages in isolation from one another (the tradition in most education systems), whereas plurilingualism is: "a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact".²¹ In accordance with this definition, the Council of Europe's concept of plurilingual and intercultural education entails that the language of schooling and additional languages of the curriculum should be taught in such a way that each learner develops an integrated linguistic repertoire; the repertoires of learners from minority and immigrant communities, of course, include their home or heritage language. To date, the concept of plurilingual education has not been widely taken up, but it is especially relevant to the educational inclusion of children and young people from linguistic minorities, including Roma who speak a variety of Romani at home and/or are not able to communicate fluently in the language of schooling. In particular, the concept of plurilingual education suggests a way of including minority languages in the life of the classroom without formally teaching them, as the following example from Ireland shows.

In recent decades Ireland has experienced unprecedented levels of immigration, which means that the education system faces the challenge of integrating children and young people whose home language is neither English nor Irish. A girls' primary school in one of Dublin's western suburbs faced an especially acute version of the challenge: in 2014/2015, some 80% of its 320 pupils came from immigrant families; most of them had little English when they started school at the age of 4 and a half; and between them they had more than 50 home languages. Clearly, this level of diversity made it impossible to offer each immigrant pupil instruction in her home language. The school nevertheless decided that it must find a role for immigrant languages in the life of the school, inside the classroom as well as outside. After all, each pupil's home language was central to her sense of identity, her default inner voice and her primary cognitive tool. To ask her to leave it outside the school gate would infringe a fundamental human right and at the same time constrain her learning.

21. CEFR, p.4.

The school resolved the problem by encouraging pupils from immigrant families to use their home language for whatever purposes seemed to them appropriate. In Junior Infants, 4- and 5-year-old immigrant pupils learned to count, add and play action games in English, Irish (the obligatory second language of the curriculum) and their home languages. From the same early age, they were invited to tell the rest of the class how they expressed key curriculum concepts in their home languages. Sometimes they had to ask their parents for the words in question – days of the week, perhaps, or months of the year. As pupils moved up the school, they were repeatedly invited to make linguistic comparisons between English, Irish and their home language. In this way their home language was always activated in their minds and their identity was fully implicated in the educational process. With support from their parents, moreover, immigrant pupils transferred their gradually developing literacy skills from English and Irish to their home language, producing texts with the same thematic content in English, Irish and their home language. This provided native-born Irish students with a strong motivation to adopt Irish as their “home language”.

The results of this approach were extremely positive. Immigrant and native-born Irish pupils alike developed high levels of age-appropriate plurilingual literacy, an unusually sophisticated degree of language awareness, an unusual enthusiasm for speaking and writing Irish, and from an early age, the capacity to undertake ambitious autonomous learning projects with a linguistic focus. For example, a class of 7-year-olds decided to translate the chorus of the song “It’s a Small World” into all the languages present in the class and used their time in the school yard to teach one another all the versions; they were then able to sing the chorus in 11 languages. And a 12-year-old pupil taught herself Spanish using two textbooks she found in the school library and various internet resources; when the principal retired, the pupil wrote her a letter of good wishes that was half in Spanish and half in English. The school had no access to special resources; its pupils nevertheless performed above the national average in the standardised tests of maths and English that they took annually from First Class (6+ years old) to Sixth Class (11+ years old).²²

This version of plurilingual education has two obvious lessons for those responsible for the educational inclusion of Roma children and young people. The inclusion of all available languages in every lesson ensures the inclusion of the speakers of those languages; at the same time, it gives speakers of the dominant language an unparalleled education in multilingualism.

22. For a detailed account of the school’s language education policy and its implementation, see Little D. and Kirwan D. (2019), *Engaging with Linguistic Diversity - A Study of Educational Inclusion in an Irish Primary School*, Bloomsbury Academic, London.

7. Five principles to guide the educational inclusion of Roma children and young people

From sections 1-6 it is possible to derive five general principles to guide the educational inclusion of Roma children and young people.

Principle 1 – The educational inclusion of Roma children and young people is a fundamental human right that should be given priority by the Council of Europe member states.

From a human rights perspective, there are two reasons why the Romani language should play a central role in the education of Roma children and young people:

- I. a policy of inclusion implies recognition of distinctive Roma identities, and those are partly shaped by the Romani language, either currently or historically (Romani culture and history should provide much of the content of language classes);
- II. students whose first/home language is a variety of Romani should be encouraged to use the language at school because everyone's first/home language is his or her primary cognitive tool. To forbid the use of first/home languages is educationally counter-productive; arguably, it also infringes a fundamental human right. When Romani is a learner's home language it will be implicated in all his or her learning; this should be made explicit in non-language classes, where the learning of curriculum content can be supported and strengthened if teachers make space for home languages other than the language of schooling. See also Principle 5.

Principle 2 – The educational inclusion of Roma children and young people should also benefit non-Roma students.

Educational inclusion is a prerequisite for social inclusion, which in turn is a prerequisite for integration. For the Council of Europe, integration is a two-way process that impacts on majority as well as minority communities. It is thus essential to find ways of ensuring that the inclusion of Romani language, culture and history in programmes of schooling also extends the linguistic, cultural and historical knowledge and awareness of non-Roma students. In some contexts, it may be possible for non-Roma students to learn the Romani language together with their Roma peers. When Roma students are partly or fully proficient in the language, they should be able to support the language learning of their non-Roma peers. The goal of such arrangements should be inclusion through awareness raising and mutual respect; high levels of communicative proficiency may well not be achievable by non-Roma students.

The inclusion of Romani and other minority languages in the discourse of non-language classrooms gives learners from the majority community an experience of multilingualism that is unlikely to be available to them in any other way.

Principle 3 – The highly variable linguistic profiles of Roma communities mean that education systems need to develop flexible approaches to the inclusion of Roma children and young people and the teaching of Romani language, culture and history.

Some Roma students will be beginners in the language, others will be able to understand the spoken language but lack productive skills and others again will have a variety of Romani as their first/home language. If the Roma students in a given school belong to more than one of these categories, they may come from different communities that are associated with different varieties of Romani. If they all come from the same community, more than one of the categories may nevertheless be represented.

Another reason for adopting a flexible approach is the general shortage of trained teachers of Romani. A significant increase in the number of trained teachers is likely to be one of the long-term benefits of the more effective educational inclusion of Roma communities. But if the availability of trained teachers is made a precondition for the inclusion of Romani language, history and culture in the educational experience of Roma and non-Roma students, it will be impossible to make progress. An obvious interim solution, already adopted in some countries, is to employ Romani speakers as classroom assistants with informal teaching duties. It is essential to acknowledge, however, that this course of action can easily give rise to inequities and justifiable resentment on the part of the classroom assistants.

Referring back to Section 6, it is worth repeating that the adoption of a plurilingual approach to education entails that the home languages of all learners, including Roma, are included in the teaching of all subjects. This requires understanding and commitment on the part of teachers, but it is not necessary for them to be proficient

in every home language present in the classroom or to be supported by a Roma teacher or teaching assistant.

Principle 4 – Flexibility is more likely to be achieved when the primary focus is on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching.

As regards Romani language classes, the Council of Europe's learner-centred approach to education is reflected in two tools that focus explicitly on learners of Romani as social agents and are designed to foster learner autonomy: the Curriculum Framework for Romani and two ELP models. Like the CEFR, the CFR implies that spontaneous interactive use of the target language will play a central role in teaching and learning (Section 5 above). It is worth noting that teachers in Slovakia who have used the Romani ELPs report that their students are motivated by the challenge of managing their own learning and enjoy assessing their own learning progress.

Principle 5 – Flexibility is also more likely to be achieved when language education focuses on the development of plurilingual repertoires (Section 6 above).

The spontaneous inclusion of minority languages in classroom communication ensures that the speakers of those languages are fully engaged with the educational process and at the same time gives all learners an invaluable experience of multilingual communication. Classrooms where there is a high degree of linguistic diversity lend themselves to learning that is managed by a teacher and supported by multilingual communication in which teaching assistants may play a mediating role.

In some countries it is a legal requirement that all schooling is conducted in the national language. Principle 5 does not seek to undermine such requirements. The national language remains the language of instruction and the principal medium of education; within the pedagogical framework it provides, the use of minority students' home languages supports the development of their proficiency in the national language and their learning of curriculum content.

8. Results of the Romani-Plurilingual Policy Experimentation (2022-2025)

The Council of Europe's Romani-Plurilingual Policy Experimentation²³ (RPPE) explored the feasibility of the pedagogical approach outlined in this document. Three member states and 10 schools participated in the project: Greece (three schools), Slovak Republic (three schools) and Slovenia (four schools). The participating schools fell into three broad categories:

- I. those that catered exclusively or almost exclusively for Roma students living in settlements;
- II. those in which Roma students were in a minority and lived in settlements; and
- III. those in which Roma students were in a minority but did not live in settlements.

The RPPE set out to show how relatively minor adjustments to school policy and classroom practice can help to bring about the transformations envisaged by the recommendations of the Committee of Ministers referred to in Section 1 of this document. At the end of three years of implementation it is possible to make the following claims.

- ▶ The inclusion of Romani language and culture in the everyday life of schools and classrooms impacts positively on the motivation and engagement of Roma pupils. In mixed schools, it also arouses the interest of non-Roma students and helps to foster social cohesion. When Roma children are not proficient in Romani, the inclusion of the language and its culture in their educational experience helps to reconnect them with an important part of their heritage.
- ▶ In Roma-only schools where students speak a variety of Romani at home, the language provides a bridge into the language of schooling. By including written forms of the language, schools and classrooms acknowledge that Romani is a language like any other; this message is reinforced when other home languages are also present and included in the same way as Romani.
- ▶ When schools engage in bi- and multilingual projects that require translation between the language of schooling, curriculum languages, Romani and other home languages, they provide all students with an experience of plurilingualism and interculturality whose cognitive, cultural and social value cannot be overestimated.

23. See, <https://go.coe.int/Roch1>.

The evidence supporting these claims is presented in two documents that will be published later in 2025, the Academic Co-ordinator's final report on the RPPE and a pedagogical handbook that draws on the activities devised by the participating schools and teachers to flesh out the pedagogical approach outlined in the present document.

It is important to emphasise that although participating schools received a small support grant from the Council of Europe, their implementation of the RPPE did not only depend on the grant. Most of the activities they undertook, whether at school or classroom level, required only minor adjustments to existing policy and pedagogical practice. It should thus be easy to replicate the achievements of the RPPE in other schools in the participating countries and in other Council of Europe member states.

Very few participating teachers claimed to be proficient in Romani. In Slovakia and Slovenia, they could call on the help of Roma assistants; in Greece they depended on whatever published resources they could find and occasional help from Roma non-governmental organisations. Either way, the RPPE shows that teachers have nothing to fear by including home languages they do not know in their lessons. Student motivation and engagement is likely to be enhanced if teachers look to them for help with their home languages.

The educational integration of Roma children and young people continues to present challenges to member states. These updated guidelines not only provide the reader with an overview of related Council of Europe policy documents but also address the gap between policy and classroom practice by presenting the pedagogical approach and findings from the Organisation's Roman Plurilingual Policy Experimentation, which took place in three member states (Greece, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia) over three academic years, from 2022 to 2025. Five general principles to guide the educational inclusion of Roma as well as of learners from other linguistic and cultural minorities are identified, based on the Council of Europe's concept of plurilingual and intercultural education and the language learner as an autonomous social agent..

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