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## Increasing academic performance in Roma preschool children

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### Abstract

The educational opportunities of minorities are a main research theme. The Roma minority has developed low expectations in terms of educational and social achievement which explains the poor adaptation to academic life and the consecutive poor academic results. Our pilot study aimed to identify the relationship between the emotional intelligence and academic performance and to develop and investigate the effectiveness of an Emotional Intelligence Development Program on preschool Roma children. The hypotheses were confirmed. The implications of this study on increasing the emotional intelligence and, consecutively the academic performance in Roma children will be discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

The educational opportunities of minorities are a main research theme in the international field. Serious scientific studies on this matter lack in Romania even though it is well-known that the Roma minority has many difficulties to adapt to the educational system, and generally to the main society. The studied minorities proved to have developed low expectations in terms of educational and social achievement which explains the poor adaptation to academic life and the consecutive poor academic results (Luciak, 2004). The same conclusion may apply to Roma minority in Romania as they have a long history of oppression and discrimination. According to Ogbu's theory (Ogbu & Simons, 1998) the treatment of the minority in the wider society can be seen in their educational treatment – overall educational policies and practices, the specific treatment of minority students in schools and classes and the lack of rewards from the main society; all are discriminatory. On another hand, studies focused on factors that may explain

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the academic performance differences between minorities and the majority population: economic status and language differences (Levels, Dronkers & Kraaykamp, 2008), other sociocultural aspects such as attitudes in school (Sewell & Hauser, 1975), folk theories about school, role models (Ogbu & Simons, 1998); differences in family rules (Caplan, Choy & Whitmore, 1992) family communication about school experiences (Kao, Tienda & Schneider, 1996) and parental participation in school activities.

There is an international consensus that intelligence is an important predictor of academic performance. Recent research showed that there are also non-cognitive factors, besides the general intelligence, responsible for high academic performance. A critical factor emerging from recent studies that significantly impacts the academic, social and professional adaptation has proven to be the emotional intelligence (e.g. Cherniss, Extein, Goleman, Weissberg, 2006). The results point to the emotional intelligence as a very powerful potential mediator of school outcomes (e.g. Parker et al, 2004; Marquez, Martin & Brackett, 2006; Mestre, Guil, Lopes, Salovey & Gil-Olarte, 2006). The proven benefits of high emotional intelligence in academic context are: coping with academic stress (Petrides, Frederickson & Furnham, 2004), improving overall school climate (Jensen & Freedman, 2006); predicting children's ability to learn and solve problems nonviolently (Zins, Weissberg, Wang & Walberg, 2004); decreasing school dropouts (Parker, Hogan, Eastabrook, Oke & Wood, 2006); reducing risky behaviors and increasing pro-social ones (Durlak & Weissberg, 2005 cited in Cherniss et. al., 2006; Petrides, Sangareau, Furnham & Frederickson, 2006; Trinidad & Johnson, 2002). The emotional intelligence is considered crucial for the academic and later social success in pre-school childhood (Denham, 2006; Arsenio, Cooperman & Lover, 2000).

This research data sustain the increased interest for the development and implementation of emotional development programs – social-emotional learning (SEL). Up till now, the main concern of educators has been to develop academic skills (reading, writing, and thinking) of children. Often emotional education has been viewed with skepticism and sustained with arguments such as time limitation in current curricula. Still “there is a solid and growing empirical base concluding that well-designed, well-implemented school-based prevention and youth development programming can positively influence a diverse array of social, health, and academic outcomes.” (Greenbert et al, 2003).

## 2. Objectives and Hypotheses

Our pilot study aimed to identify the relationship between the emotional intelligence and academic performance and to develop and investigate the effectiveness of an Emotional Intelligence Development Program on preschool Roma children. Our main hypotheses were: a) academic performance positively correlates with emotional intelligence; b) the emotional intelligence and consecutively, the academic performance would significantly increase in children undergoing the Program; c) the Emotional Intelligence Development Program would significantly improve the emotional intelligence and the academic performance in comparison with the control group.

## 3. Method

We developed an Emotional Intelligence Development Program (EIDP) in order to build social-emotional competencies in Roma preschoolers – knowing, managing and vectoring their emotions, increasing empathy and positive interpersonal relationships. EIDP for Roma preschool children aimed to develop the socio-emotional skills in the educational environment in order to prevent the emotional issues of preschool developmental stage and, also the school dropout. We used various types of exercises and techniques such as: making lists of emotions in order to identify them; exercises for evaluating discomfoting situations; managing conflicts or developing empathy and assertiveness.

The program was divided into 10 group sessions, lasting 120 minutes each, performed weekly. The 20 preschoolers were actually divided into two groups of 10 in order for the activities to be conducted in a more appropriate setting and for every child to be able to work effectively. We used the Emotional Intelligence Scale for Children (Roco, 2004). Four teachers used a four scale criteria (low, average, high and superior) in order to evaluate the children's academic performance. N=40 Roma children from preparatory class aged between 6-8 years. We formed two equivalent groups – 20 children participated to our four-month EIDP and 20 children formed the control group. The two groups were equivalent regarding age, gender, level of education, level of general intelligence, level

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