

Equal Access to Education: An Evaluation of the Roma Teaching Assistant Program in Serbia

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Summary. — This paper investigates the effects of a remedial education program—the Roma Teaching Assistant Program—targeting the socially excluded Roma minority in Serbia. By using first-hand collected data, we find evidence that children exposed to the program went more to school. We do not find an effect on dropouts or marks for all grades. An examination of heterogeneous effects suggests that children in the first grade benefited more from the program as compared to their older peers through lower dropouts and better marks. Overall, our results suggest that well-targeted remedial education programs can boost outcomes of low performers.
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Key words — primary education, remedial education, Roma, ethnic minority, absences, dropouts

1. INTRODUCTION

Roma are mainly located in South Eastern Europe and with a population of approximately six million people they constitute the largest ethnic minority in the continent (Open Society Institute, 2008).¹ They experience severe social exclusion in terms of high poverty levels (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014), low educational attainments (Brueggemann, 2012)² and no participation in the political and cultural life (Kocze, 2012).

Schooling is considered to be a remedy to alleviate poverty and improve living conditions of disadvantaged ethnic or racial groups and to foster their integration: higher enrollment rates and better achievement at school are expected to lead to persistent effects in the labor market and in the reduction of poverty in the long-run. The Roma Teaching Assistant (RTA) Program is the main intervention targeting Roma inclusion in education in South Eastern Europe. Roma assistants—one per school—participate in regular lessons where they provide additional help to Roma pupils who have difficulties in following classes. They organize additional lessons, help them with their homework and assignments and once per week visit to their parents.

The goal of this paper is to evaluate the impact of the RTA Program in the first year of its introduction.³ We examine the causal effect of the RTA Program by asking the following three questions. Does the program reduce dropouts? Does the program raise attendance? Does the program improve marks? To answer these questions, we use primary data collected during five months in the Summer–Autumn 2010. We employ two different econometric strategies and their combination. First, we exploit the gradual implementation and the intensity of the program in order to base the evaluation of its impact on a comparison of *Early* and *Late Enrollees*. Second, we compare children exposed to the program to older cohorts less exposed to it. There is evidence that all children exposed to the program went on average more to school. We also find evidence that marks improved in mathematics and Serbian for first graders. Higher impacts are obtained in schools with a lower number of Roma. This is especially the case for girls, for whom being in a school with a lower number of Roma turns out to be more favorable. Boys

respond to the program with fewer absences in schools with fewer Roma.

Only a handful of studies focus on the issues related to the education of Roma people. These studies investigate topics such as the effects of school segregation and the importance of affirmative actions, the role of preschool, and the Roma/Non Roma achievement gap. In many countries in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe, Roma pupils are often segregated from Non Roma pupils and unjustifiably placed in schools for mentally disabled children. The attendance of these so-called special schools has a negative effect on educational attainment and on later labor market outcomes (O’Higgins & Brueggemann, 2014). Thus desegregation policies are necessary and governments have committed to desegregating schools, but their implementation has not been successful (Rostas & Kostka, 2014). Conversely, affirmative action policies are an important tool for increasing the access to higher education for Roma (Garaz, 2014).⁴ The attendance of preschool has been shown to help to reduce the gap in

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cognitive outcomes for Roma children (World Bank, 2012).⁵ Moreover, two interesting studies (Baucal, 2006; Kertesi & Kezdi, 2011) investigate the Roma/Non Roma gap and find large differences in educational outcomes between Roma and Non Roma. Both studies show that the achievement gap between the two groups decreases when accounting for the lower socio-economical status of Roma.⁶

The principal contribution of this paper is that it adds evidence on short-term effects of remedial education targeting a stigmatized ethnic group. Rigorous evaluations of remedial education programs are rare. Policies targeting low-performing students are generally difficult to evaluate because children with learning difficulties are not randomly assigned to programs. A few studies are able to overcome the identification problem and they find support for the effectiveness of remedial education in the short run (Banerjee, Cole, Duflo, & Linden, 2007; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2002; Jacob & Lefgren, 2004; Lavy & Schlosser, 2005). The RTA Program is different from a standard remedial education intervention because it targets a marginalized group that is widespread believed to be different and cannot be integrated. In this case it would not be enough to offer “only” remedial education, because the program could be ineffective for two reasons. First, an additional Non Roma teacher could have low expectations and could not put in effort. Baucal (2006) in fact shows that in Serbia school teachers have lower expectations from Roma and that they dedicate less time to them thus this mechanism could be especially important in our context. Second, the children could not respond to the program because of expected low returns to education. Jensen (2010) has demonstrated that expected returns do affect the schooling decision. Therefore, the way in which the RTA Program affects both the demand and supply side of education is as follows. On the one hand, children are provided with more teaching time. The intervention alters the inputs in the education production function by providing more instruction time to pupils through teaching assistants. Additionally, negative stereotypes about Roma students could be softened and teachers themselves could be providing more support in learning. This is part of the supply side of education. On the other hand, Roma teaching assistant has the same background as the targeted children and she acts as a role model for them. The role model mechanism can affect preferences for education of both children and parents and is expected to affect the demand for education of the Roma population.⁷

This study also speaks to the literature on programs aiming at improving schooling outcomes of minority communities and the poor. The United States has a long tradition of work on evaluations of school programs targeting disadvantaged groups. A wide range of programs across different stages of the life cycle have been evaluated. Some of the well-known primary school interventions include after-school programs (Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow, & Martin-Glenn, 2006), merit pay for principals, teachers, and students (Fryer, 2010; Podgursky & Springer, 2007), professional development for teachers (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009), getting parents to be more involved (Domina, 2005), placing disadvantaged students in better schools through desegregation busing (Angrist & Lang, 2004) or altering the neighborhoods in which they live (Jacob, 2004; Sanbonmatsu, Kling, Duncan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). The evidence on the efficacy of these interventions is mixed: certain programs have left the achievement gap essentially unchanged while others were more successful. This literature thus underscores the importance of rigorous evaluations in order to use the available financial resources in the most efficient way.

An additional contribution of this paper is that we give an accurate overview of the attainments of Roma pupils, for which so far the data were limited, and contrast their achievement to the average Non Roma pupils. Our study is able to examine a wide range of outcomes which have been not examined jointly to this date (such as dropouts and absences) due to limited availability of data. To get a better understanding of the effectiveness of an intervention it is important to understand if and at which margin it is working. Policies that promote school enrollment may not promote learning (Miguel & Kremer, 2004; Schultz, 2004). We believe that the outcomes we use together with marks give a complete overview of the current state of educational achievements of Roma pupils.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the Serbian context that we are studying. Section 3 summarizes the Roma Teaching Assistant Program and describes our data. Section 4 explains our empirical strategy and presents our results. Section 5 discusses the findings and concludes.

2. COUNTRY CONTEXT

Data on Roma in Serbia are inaccurate and scarce. Surveys often lack information about ethnic identity of the respondents. More importantly, when asked about their ethnicity, some Roma people do not declare themselves as Roma. Most of them consider themselves both Roma and Serbian and the question of nationality allows only one answer.

The official 2011 census counts 147,600 Roma, while estimates put forward a number between 350,000 and 500,000 or approximately 5–7% of the overall population (Stojanović & Baucal, 2007). Most Roma live in segregated settlements and have different demographic characteristics from the rest of the population. According to the World Bank Living Standard Measurement Survey (LSMS) 2003—which provides a boosted sample of Roma in Serbia—their households are more numerous than the average household, they have more children and their population is younger. The percentage of male Roma who declare to have worked over the last week is similar to the national average (69%). Contrary to men, the participation of women is 34% and considerably lower than the national average (53%). Overall, approximately 60% of Roma have a consumption below the poverty line and weekly consumption of food per household member is half the national average.

Turning to education, 60% of Roma younger than 18 years have not completed primary education. In contrast, only 20% of overall population do not have a primary school diploma. Out of all children of primary school-age, 30% of Roma do not attend school whereas this is the case for only 1% of the overall population of primary school-age. Using data from the National Assessment Study conducted with third-grade students, Baucal (2006) finds that after the first three years of school Roma pupils lag 2.2–2.5 years behind the average student. Also, children from Roma ethnic minority performed worse on standardized tests than Non Roma children with the same socio-economic background.

The main barriers of access to education for Roma are absence of documents, financial constraints, parents' low educational background, child labor, discrimination from teachers and pupils and language barriers (Open Society Institute, 2008). In the recent years Serbian schools started enrolling children with incomplete documents, but there is still a minor number of children not able to enroll due to lack of them. According to the law, the local government should

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