

# Hearing Emanuel's Story



Emanuel, a six-year-old Roma boy, sits at the table drawing a portrait of his mother. He carefully draws the outline of her hair, then traces in the rest of her body. He selects his pencil crayons with precision so that the colours match those of his mother's outfit as if he were painting by number. Forest green cardigan. Blue jean skirt. Brown turtleneck. He looks up at her every few minutes to check the resemblance and smiles with satisfaction. It is obvious that he is a keen observer. He is focused and calm.

But he was not always this way explains his mother. When he was younger he often had a look of confusion on his face, had few friends in the neighbourhood and would lash out in frustration. The parents were concerned that their boy would not be able to go to school as he had problems fitting in. This was before they discovered, with the help of a local NGO, that he had eighty per cent deafness. Suddenly his confusion and frustration were understandable. Emanuel couldn't hear and was not able to communicate and this caused his parents a great deal of concern.

The Roma people make up the largest minority population in Europe and have faced generations of social and institutional discrimination. In the Central and Eastern European region there are an estimated 3.7 million Roma, of which approximately 46 per cent are children. Roma families face a number of challenges in ensuring that the basic needs and rights of their children are respected. Most Roma people live in settlements which are not reached by health, education and welfare services. Families often fall below the poverty line and live on the margins of society.

When it comes to breaking the vicious cycle of poverty, one of the greatest challenges is education and making sure that all children can exercise their right to attend schools which embody the values of equity and inclusion. Statistics show that while many Roma children enrol in school few continue their education after the primary years. In fact, in The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia less than half of the 63 per cent of Roma children who enter primary school manage to complete it. The numbers are similar across Southern and Eastern European countries. Less than one in four Roma children in the region participate in any organised early learning programme prior to school entry. Experts agree that this lack of readiness for schooling is one of the principal reasons for the lower enrolment and high drop out rates among Roma children.



ROMA GOOD START INITIATIVE



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Emanuel and his family live in Topaana, a Roma settlement in Skopje the capital of The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The narrow pathway leading to their house slopes slightly downhill and is made up of layers of concrete. Sewage trickles downstream into an open gutter. Many of the houses in the neighbourhood have neither adequate plumbing nor electricity. The homes range from four-wall two-story brick homes to shacks no bigger than a truck. The yards are decorated with strings of colourful children's clothing drying in the cool air. Emanuel's family home is warm and inviting. The walls of the neat and tidy front room are painted a pale yellow. "Things all started to change once we met the people at *Sumnal* and started bringing Emanuel to the centre," explains his mother.



*Sumnal* (Romani for 'world') is a local NGO founded by a group of concerned citizens to change the stark reality faced by many children of the Roma communities. Their goal is to improve the lives and living standards of children in the community through education. *Sumnal* runs a fully staffed community drop-in centre which offers everything from early learning groups, homework help, family outreach, health education and literacy training. *Sumnal* has become an information hub in the settlement. Since the centre opened in 2004 the grade point average of Roma students attending *Sumnal* has increased by 40 per cent and the number of secondary school students has jumped from zero to almost thirty. They pride themselves on getting all their children ready for school, primed to fight against the status quo. *Sumnal* is a place where everyone can feel at home.

Over the course of the last two years, *Sumnal* has become a daily part of Emanuel's life. He goes there both alone and with his parents. With the help of *Sumnal* they were able to file the right paperwork and find funding to get a hearing aid for Emanuel. This is when the learning began. "We've seen a huge change in his behaviour," share Afrodita Rakipovska, Early Childhood Specialist at *Sumnal*. "He used to be so shy and withdrawn. Now he is playful and has made many friends with his ability to make people laugh. He comes here almost every day to study. He is ready for success at school."

"Supporting children at these early stages gives the greatest results and is the key to inclusive education. We are inspiring our children to be good students," adds Rakipovska. Studies show that in The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 98 per cent of Roma children, who had attended preschool, graduated from primary school. In comparison, less than half of the Roma students, who did not go to preschool, completed primary school. The situation is even worse for Roma girls, who often drop out of school earlier than boys.

UNICEF is working together with local partners like *Sumnal* to achieve an inclusive education system through advocating for educational reforms across the region. The inclusion of children in education as early as possible is proven to be an effective way to support their development and to give them the significant possibility of escaping from the vicious cycle of poverty. Breaking the barriers to education goes beyond school enrolment and includes social, economic and political factors. The *Sumnal* model of community engagement helps tie all these elements together. Through educating the community they are giving Roma children and families a voice.

Back at Emanuel's house, his colourful pet bird is tribute to a time long gone. In times of frustration this bird was the only thing that could calm him down. He carefully unlatches the cage and slowly moves his hand inside. At first the bird flaps its wings wildly and squawks; it then perches on Emanuel's finger and begins to chirp. The child's face breaks into a broad smile. He is captivated. His mom sitting by his side strokes his back in comforting way. "It is time for school," she says. Emanuel jumps up and his mother helps him slip on his backpack. She stands in the doorway waving goodbye as his father takes him by the hand and together they walk to school. Emanuel is getting ready for the first grade and is one of the top pupils in his preschool class.

*The story was researched and written by Sonja Miokovic on behalf of UNICEF.*  
UNICEF photos by Sonja Miokovic.