

The theatre workshop, “Education, Rights and Belonging” was co-organized by Ioana Szeman, University of Roehampton, London, the cultural association *Invizibil*, Cluj, Romania, led by Cristina Marian, and the Puppet Theatre “Puck” Cluj, where the workshop and final performance took place. The workshop used Forum Theatre methods to initiate a dialogue with the participants, young Roma and non-Roma students, about education, rights and belonging. Many young Roma continue face institutionalized racism and are made to attend schools for students with disabilities in countries across East Central Europe, most of them EU member states. The Roma communities in Romania are, like elsewhere in Europe, marginalised and facing both overt and subvert forms of discrimination. Indeed, “hidden discrimination” is taking place on a wide scale, despite the fact that policies and legislation are already in place that proscribe it. An overwhelming number of Roma children continue to attend special schools for children with disabilities in Romania, including some of the workshop participants.

Szeman’s ethnographic research in Romania has revealed how institutionalized racism that dates back to communist times, when Roma children were enrolled in special schools and arbitrarily declared mentally disabled, continues today and how parents, children, teachers and education officials directly or indirectly participate in it, despite the fact that ethnic discrimination is illegal in Romania as an EU member state. Moreover, the research has demonstrated that often the ongoing processes of discrimination experienced by children in mainstream schools result in Roma parents and children opting to go to these special schools themselves, whilst in other cases, because of weak attendance in mainstream schools, Roma children are transferred, with the parents’ consent, to special schools. The Roma children are also agents in opting out of mainstream education as they often prefer to go to special schools where they may have friends who are already there.

At the end of the week-long workshop (16-23 July), a public performance and forum theatre session sought to open up the dialogue with local authorities, parents and teachers from Cluj. Theatre workshops engage young people, both Roma and non-Roma, and facilitate cross-cultural understanding among them, as well as raise awareness about the discrimination Roma children experience. The final performances and forum discussions engaged a diverse range of audiences simultaneously: Roma parents who may be reluctant to oppose their children’s transfer to special schools, and whom the forums may encourage to do so; teachers in special schools who may take for granted the current situation and may start to think differently about their role in perpetuating the status quo; the children themselves who may come to think differently about the benefits of mainstream education; government officials who are alerted to a situation they may not be aware of, and offered tools for addressing it; members of Romanian society unaware of this hidden discrimination process. A number of follow-up workshops and final performances are planned for 2016.