

## educational screening kit

### Theme #education

### OUR SCHOOL

Director: Mona Nicoara and Miruna Coca-Cozma

Genre: Documentary

Release Date: 2011

Length: 94 minutes

Format: HDCam/DigiBeta

Production: US/Switzerland/Romania

Language: Romanian, with English or French subtitles

Official website: <http://ourschoolfilm.blogspot.fr>

Produced by: Sat Mic Film in co-production with Pipas Films in association with Motto Pictures

More credits and technical information on the official website

Buy DVD: <https://www.newday.com/film/our-school>

#### Synopsis:

**Our School** follows three Roma (commonly known as "Gypsy") children in a rural Transylvanian village who are among the pioneer participants in an initiative to integrate the ethnically segregated Romanian schools. When their school is desegregated, Alin, Benjamin, and Dana set out for the city school, optimistic for education and new friendships, even as funds earmarked for integration are questionably used to build a "Roma-only" school in their village. Their innocent optimism quickly sours when the children are met with low expectations and further isolation. Shot over four years, the filmmakers' tender portrait of rural village life and its rhythms fosters an intimacy in the children's profound reality and admiration for their indomitable spirit, punctuated by shocking instances of prejudice and ignorance. Their story touches on issues ranging from institutionalized racism, public education, and the intractability of poverty, culminating in an outrageous finale that cements the Roma children's struggle in the annals of egregious human rights violations. **Our School** is an absorbing, infuriating, and ultimately bittersweet story of tradition and progress.

#### Biography of Directors

##### Mona Nicoara

Producer and Director Mona Nicoara was born in Communist Romania; after the 1989 Revolution she began creative work with human rights activism, and continued these parallel tracks after moving to New York to pursue graduate studies at Columbia University in 1995. She started working in film in 1997 as an Associate Producer for *Children Underground*, a US feature-length documentary about street children which received the Special Jury Prize at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival, went on to win the Gotham Documentary Achievement Award, and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary.

Co-Director and Co-Producer Miruna Coca-Cozma is a graduate of the BBC School of Journalism and of the Romanian Theater and Film Academy; she has worked as a journalist for Antena 1, TVR, TSR, and France 5. Her most recent project is *Omar Porras: Sorcier de la Scene* (2008) for TSR.

#### Viewer's guide

Submit an e-mail request for a viewer's guide to [ourschoolfilm \[at\] gmail \[dot\] com](mailto:ourschoolfilm@gmail.com)

## What to read to get some useful background information?

### ★ To learn about education of Roma children and school segregation

We recommend you read the report “Segregation of Roma Children in Education - Successes and Challenges” by Gwendolyn Albert, Margareta Matache, Marius Taba, and Adriána Zimová (2015).

[http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/documents/segregation\\_of\\_roma\\_children\\_in\\_education\\_-\\_successes\\_and\\_challenges\\_-\\_final.pdf](http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/documents/segregation_of_roma_children_in_education_-_successes_and_challenges_-_final.pdf)

Sections we recommend in particular:

- Introduction
- School Segregation of Roma Children: Key Facts
- Desegregating Schools: What Has Been Done Thus Far?

### ★ To learn about the situation of Roma in Romania

You can find an helpful introduction on the film’s website

<http://ourschoolfilm.blogspot.fr/p/about-roma.html>

### ★ For concrete examples of discrimination across Europe in different countries

Check pages 90 and 91 of “Mirrors: Manual on combating antigypsyism through human rights education” a manual produced by Council of Europe and written by Ellie Keen (2015).

<https://rm.coe.int/1680494094>

### ★ Key terms/definitions to keep in mind

- Direct and indirect discrimination
- Structural / institutional discrimination

Check pages 53 and 54 of “Mirrors: Manual on combating antigypsyism through human rights education” a manual produced by Council of Europe and written by Ellie Keen (2015).

<https://rm.coe.int/1680494094>

### ★ To go further, you can take a look at:

- “Report on discrimination of Roma children in education” by Lilla Farkas for the European Network of Legal Experts in the Non-Discrimination Field (2014).  
[http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma\\_childdiscrimination\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma_childdiscrimination_en.pdf)

- Online exhibition "The Forgotten Genocide: "The fate of the Sinti and Roma", with general information about the treatment of Roma during the Holocaust.

<http://romasinti.eu/>

## Questions for discussion after the screening

- What do you think about the end of the movie? How does it affect the future of the children? What do you think are the main reason(s) that they end up in a special school?
- What are the aims of each protagonist (Roma students, parents, teachers, school director, mayor)? Are these aims contradictory to each other?
- What are the consequences of the unequal education system for the Roma students? And for society?
- Who could change this situation? How could it be changed? What are the barriers for change?
- How can someone who is not a teacher/school director/mayor/politician, etc., contribute to this change?
- What do you think about the building of the new school next to the Roma settlement?
- What do you think the consequences of education are on traditions/models of reproduction?

## Workshop outline ideas:

### 1. This is the end?

Objectives:

- Improve critical thinking and debating skills
- Reflect on structural discrimination in the education system

Print out the statements below and put them on the wall in different corners of the room. Ask participants to choose one that they agree with the most and stand there. Facilitate a discussion about why they chose that side. Tell them that they can change their opinion and place during the discussion, and ask them to share the reasons for their change of opinion in the discussion.

What do you think about the end of the movie?

- ❖ It was the best decision for the students to put them in a special school, as Beni also said he preferred the special school.
- ❖ It is very bad to put children in a special school without any disability that would legitimize this decision. It can ruin a child's future and will have a negative effect on society.
- ❖ This was a very bad decision, but if they have enough strength and motivation, the children will reach their dreams anyway.
- ❖ It is the only possible solution. Other schools and teachers don't have enough capacity to integrate them.

It is important for the facilitator to read about the selective structures and segregation in the education system in the background information. It is important to give information about how structural discrimination manifests in the education system, in order to avoid reinforcing stereotypes.

Ask participants what could be changed to create a better future for the students and for society as well.

## 2. Alternative lives

Objectives:

- Raise awareness about the problems in the education system
- Raise awareness about the impact and responsibility of the school in the children's future
- Increase empathy towards children who face discrimination and segregation

Participants should form small groups of 3-4 people. Ask each group to draw Alin/Dana/other character (or an imaginary child from the settlement) at the age of 6. Give them colour pencils, pens, paint, magazines, scissors, glue, various tools. Ask them to imagine his/her character and draw/write: What does he like to play the most? What is his favourite food? What is he afraid of the most? What does he want to become in the future? Etc.

Ask one group to draw/paint/visualize the possible life path of the character if he/she stays in the segregated school at the Roma settlement. The second group should draw/paint/visualize the possible outcome if he/she stays in the integrated class in town. The third group should draw/paint/visualize the possible outcome if he/she stays in the special school. After they finish, ask each group to present their work to the others, compare the different life paths and discuss the impact of structural discrimination in the education system on the lives of the characters and on society.

## 3. The jump

Objectives:

- Analyze a key moment from the movie
- Understand the motivation, thoughts and emotions of the characters
- Think about the roles and responsibilities in the conflict and the possibilities of changing the situation

Watch again the scene from the movie when Alin jumps over the fence (starts at 37:55 min). The participants will first create a still image with their bodies representing the moment right before the jump. Ask volunteers to play the roles of the different characters (Alin, teacher, other kids). Some participants can be observers.

The participants with specific roles make the still image of the moment before the jump. Ask the observers to interpret what they see in the image. Then ask the others to make a new image of the moment after the jump. Tell them that when you touch the shoulder of someone from the image, he/she must say what his/her character is thinking or feeling in that moment.

The participants can then bring the image to life. Ask them to play the scene as they remember it from the movie. Ask the observers if they agree with the way the performing group played it and discuss if they remember it differently. Ask if someone has an idea to change the situation in a way that would create a better outcome. If someone offers an idea, then he/she should not describe their idea in words but rather step into the scene and play a character that he/she chooses to change the situation. After the new scene is finished, ask the others to share their opinion about this solution - do they think it was better end than in the movie? do they think that it could realistically happen? If there are more ideas, you can replay the scene and discuss it several times.

## 4. The rivers of Learning

Objectives:

- to reflect on important learning moments in one's life;
- to become aware of what and how one learnt at school
- to share and compare with others
- to better understand the impact of school in children's future

The participants are introduced to the aims of the exercise and get a big piece of paper and access to pens, pencils and paints. They are asked to look back over their lives and think about times or events when they really felt they learnt something. They are asked to think about specifically what contributed (or not!) to their learning at school. The result of this reflection should end up on the paper using the metaphor of a river. They get around half an hour to do so.

In small groups of two or three, people then share as much or as little as they want of their river with each other. Ask them to find out if there are any similarities between their ideas as well as the major differences about what and how they learned.

In a full group discussion these questions could be asked:

- ❖ How was it to use the river metaphor for your learning?
- ❖ What was challenging in finding your most important learning moments?
- ❖ Was there anything surprising in your personal reflection?
- ❖ What similarities and differences in your group when you shared your rivers?
- ❖ Thinking back to the film: what other consequences of school segregation could you identify now?

Tips

One of the 'surprising' elements for participants is often that the most important things they learned took place outside of traditional learning environments like schools, courses etc. This gives the opportunity to try to analyse what makes a situation or environment one that is suited for learning. It is interesting to reflect on the hidden effect of school segregation from that point of view.

Put the drawings on the wall after the exercise so that people can look at each other's rivers and continue their discussion.

*\*Source: exercise from the Facilitators's Handbook, Learn to Learn practice, Paul Kloosterman | Mark E. Taylor adapted to this context.*