



## RESEARCH BRIEFINGS

STEP: CENTRE FOR MOBILE CULTURES AND EDUCATION

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### **Roma women designing smartphone apps**

#### **Ro|M|Ap: The Roma multilingual app to support mobility and social change**

**October 2017**

#### ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This briefing describes STEP's work with European Roma communities in Glasgow using digital technology to support mobility and social change. This project extends STEP's research on digital media to promote community cohesion and inclusion and support educational pathways for the women of the European Roma community in Scotland. The project resulted in the creation of an innovative multilingual language learning app for smartphones designed by Roma women that could serve as a support for language learning and a bridge between education and the community, for themselves and other women.

#### BACKGROUND

Roma populations form the largest ethnic minority group in Europe. They experience some of the highest levels of illiteracy, poorest rates of school attendance, and lowest levels of educational engagement and attainment of any ethnic minority. These issues impact social and economic outcomes for Roma communities and their ability to participate in a democratic society.

Roma communities in the Scottish context face similar issues to Roma cultures across Europe . There are approximately 5000 Roma in Scotland with the majority reported to be based in the Govanhill area of Glasgow . Migration flow is continually changing and Roma families can be very resistant to self-identifying as Roma, meaning that numbers can vary greatly. There is little interaction between various Roma groups, and there are known tensions within the community. Parents from Roma cultures and school staff continue to report a range of complex factors which exist as barriers to education, and participation in school life and wider community.

Roma women play a pivotal role in their children's learning and engagement with schools and services. However, isolation of Roma women is common. While children and husbands have reasonable

exposure to the wider community through work and school, women contend with a range of contributory factors to isolation such as maternal roles and low literacy levels. This leads to poor communication with schools and low engagement with other services in the community. Children's learning and participation with formal education can be greatly affected.

The targeted school in this project recognised the need to engage and support Roma women's participation in schools and services. They sought an initiative which could support the positive blending of cultures (school & Roma culture) to respect and ensure the relevance of learning to new and mobile families. In turn, Roma groups would be more willing to participate in school life, become more aware of their valued role in their children's learning and education, and become more able to identify and access useful services and groups within their community.

In partnership with the school STEP established a group led by women for women that was successful in building positive relationships. The Roma women became involved in leading trips, attending assemblies and parents' evenings, and suggesting future initiatives which could tackle pervasive issues for them and other Roma families.

## THE PROJECT

The Roma Multilingual App project 'Ro|M|Ap' extends STEP's research on digital media to promote community cohesion and inclusion and support educational pathways for the women of the European Roma community in Scotland<sup>1</sup>. The research demonstrated that:

- The women identified language as the greatest barrier they face daily to accessing services and engaging in school and wider community.
- As Romani is an oral language there were no formal resources to support interpreters and ESL teachers in supporting the women.
- The Roma women were concerned about dilution of their 'native' culture and ability to support their children's education and their own language development when moving to Scotland<sup>2</sup>.
- All the women were confident users of smart phones which they could use flexibly. The women realised and valued the potential for technology to support their language learning through multimodal and mobile forms.
- Co-production ensures cultural relevance, ownership and empowerment. Research shows that the most effective initiatives have been Roma-led<sup>3</sup>.
- Shared education activities on mobile devices foster connections between settings, for example, between home and school, between parents and children, and between groups within the community.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.step.education.ed.ac.uk/family-literacy-research/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.step.education.ed.ac.uk/family-literacy-tp/>

<sup>3</sup> Clark C. (2014) Glasgow's Ellis Island? The integration and stigmatisation of Govanhill's Roma population. *People, Place and Policy* 8(1): 34-50.

As a solution to one of the main issues identified, the women suggested the creation of a bilingual language app that could serve as a support for language learning and a bridge between education and the community, for themselves and other women.

The school-based project in the Govanhill area of Glasgow involved a core group of 15 Romanian and Slovakian Roma women who worked with software developers to design an innovative language learning app for smartphones. Workshops were supported by translators and EAL teacher. The project aimed to create a highly visual and interactive app which would meet the women's personal and cultural needs. It would provide engaging learning experiences, useful phrases, translation tools, and vocabulary development to support the Roma women in their daily lives<sup>4</sup>.

The RoMAp project enabled women to create a unique multilingual language learning app in two Roma languages, Romanian and Slovakian, with personalisation through the use of cultural iconography, personalised images and local dialects. The app draws on functionality that supports independent learning. The app has dual purposes of language learning, and localised information on themes chosen by the women such as school, health and travel around the city. Glasgow City Council staff would be available to support the design and interpretation of flashcards and upload the content to the apps during weekly workshop sessions. Women could also undertake this process themselves.

The app's key features are:

- Lessons: Using a multiple-choice format with image and text, the women must select the correct English word as represented in the image prompt. Vocabulary is built as they test and consolidate their knowledge.
- Situations: Women learn useful phrases for specific situations in local contexts. For example, women learn to ask for a single/return bus ticket in Glasgow or how to make an appointment at the doctors through written examples and audio recordings of the English phrases – with Romanian and Slovakian written translation.
- Flashcard Creator: Using flashcard templates, the women are able to design their own learning units in words and images. To create a new flashcard, they upload an image (from existing images on their phone or by taking a photo using their camera), then input the associated word. Each woman's language bank will continually grow in richness and complexity as she creates new flashcards with new English words and phrases. Each user will create their own personalised learning pathways.
- Translation: The app translates Romanian and Slovakian languages into English and vice versa.

The pilot version of the app was shared with the school and women in June 2017 as a download from Google Play store<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Themes, features and function of app were identified by the women.

<sup>5</sup> <http://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.ionicframework.romapp182686>

## OUTCOMES

The school and parents reported the many benefits of creating a personalised and cultural language app. The app:

- Allowed the women to take ownership of their own learning
- Provided the women with shared learning opportunities for parent and child
- Empowered the women to engage with school more, and access services in the community
- Afforded flexible learning – anytime any place - complimenting to mobile lifestyles
- Allowed unique personalisation of content and learning pathways
- Facilitated community cohesion, addressing tensions between different Roma groups
- Ensured cultural relevance e.g. using familiar reference images and app icons
- Ensured contextual and personal relevance as it allowed women to select content which will be most helpful in their daily lives, addressing identified challenges in specific situations.

The positive impact of the Ro|M|Ap project will be extended through an ESRC Impact Acceleration Award. Impact acceleration will be achieved through activities including user-driven peer mentoring workshops, the further development of the app into additional languages and improved functionality, an interdisciplinary think-tank event with technologists, educators and the Roma community to explore the potential for the social shaping of technology to meet the needs of the community, and the creation of resources to support app use which will be disseminated through STEP's website and communication channels.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

STEP would like to thank the Roma families who were involved in the project. Their enthusiastic participation and insights were greatly valued. STEP would also like to extend its gratitude to the school, translators and EAL teacher who facilitated the group workshops and have shown ongoing commitment to our work.

This research was partly funded by the Scottish Government Promoting Equality and Cohesion Fund (2016-2017) and the University of Edinburgh's Impact Acceleration Fund (2017-18).



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