



Gypsies, Roma and Travellers

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are among the lowest achieving groups in our schools. With the first national Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month coming up in June, **Graham Pepper** of the DCSF looks at ways in which schools can support these vulnerable pupils.



“Children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities should feel safe and cherished in school,” but have suffered “atrocious levels of prejudice and bullying,” said schools minister Lord Andrew Adonis, announcing the first ever Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month, to take place this June. “We know that children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities can achieve just as well as any other child,” he continued. “We need to raise awareness and aspirations in local authorities, schools, parents and pupils to produce the step change needed.”

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month aims to explore the history, culture and language of travelling communities and include them in the curriculum for all pupils. It also aims to challenge myths and break down barriers, and celebrate the richness that the travelling communities bring to our everyday lives.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has adopted the generic term Gypsy, Roma and Traveller which covers all travelling children including those who travel with fairs and circuses and who live on boats. Recently, a growing number of EU Roma have come to England, fleeing discrimination and oppression. The government is committed to improving outcomes for all Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, young people and families.

Gypsy/Roma and Traveller people of Irish heritage are two distinct ethnic groups, recognised under the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000), and have been included in school census data collection since 2003. They are amongst the lowest achieving groups in our schools. Year on year they fall further behind other children. We have a joint responsibility to narrow the achievement gap.

What are the issues?

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are some of the most vulnerable and socially excluded groups in Britain today. Their overall health status is relatively poor in comparison with other disadvantaged groups, and very poor compared with the general population.

For far too long society has shunned people from these communities. This has resulted in their growing mistrust of authority and many generations not receiving a good education. Parents and children say prejudice and discrimination are endemic in their everyday lives.

Primary schools, working closely with Traveller Education Support Services, have helped more Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children to enjoy their early school years, but attendance and achievement are still concerns. These children are more likely to be identified with behaviour-related special educational needs, and are more likely to be permanently excluded than other pupils.

The children often fail to achieve the minimum levels of literacy and numeracy needed in today's society. Many do not transfer to secondary education or drop out early. In 2003, Ofsted reported that 12,000 secondary Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children were out of school.

Many parents and pupils from these communities do not wish to identify themselves in school census data. This means only small numbers are recorded, which can lead to schools, local authorities and policy makers overlooking these groups in policy development and implementation.

The Every Child Matters agenda and other initiatives from the DCSF should be making a real difference, but they are often too slow to reach these communities and make a positive change.

Making progress

Working towards and achieving good practice in the education of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils is the responsibility of everyone within the education system – the DCSF, local authorities, schools, teachers, governors, Traveller Education Support Services, parents and pupils. Major initiatives undertaken so far include:

- *The Inclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children and Young People*, published by the DCSF in February 2008. This guidance document for local authorities and schools offers a range of strategies to encourage the integration and empowerment of traveller communities.
- *Early Years Outreach Practice Guidance*, produced by Save the Children. This includes a range of tools and approaches to help practitioners engage and work with children and families from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.
- A National Strategies-managed programme started in September 2006, with 12 local authorities and 48 primary and secondary schools. This offers targeted support to meet the aspirations of parents and pupils. In September 2008 the programme will be expanded to 22 authorities and over 90 schools. A DVD of good practice and case studies will be produced in the summer term 2008.
- The e-learning and mobility project (ELAMP) offers laptops and datacards to provide good quality distance learning opportunities for children who travel with their families during the school year. A virtual learning environment has also been piloted, offering disaffected young people at Key Stage 4 the opportunity to obtain accredited key skills as a stepping stone back to school and college. It has proven that these children have enthusiasm and a real thirst for learning.

Celebrating Roma culture

Shaftesbury primary school in the London borough of Newham has organised a range of events and activities to help pupils understand Roma culture and history. These include:

- workshops involving members of the Roma community, including musicians, dancers, singers and representatives of different professions
- pupils exploring Roma history, stories and poems and recording their work – research, storytelling, drama, music, singing and dancing – on film
- pupils sharing their work and performances with the rest of the school, their families and members of the local Roma community
- pupils creating large-scale displays about the Roma around the school.

These activities have reinforced respect for diversity in the school community. Roma pupils are proud to celebrate their culture at school and non-Roma pupils enjoy learning about the Roma. Parents are keen for their children to attend, and are willing to say that they are Roma when they enter the school.

How can schools make a difference?

- Ask the Traveller Education Support Service (TESS), in co-operation with parents from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, to run awareness training sessions for school staff and governors.
- Make sure you have effective race equality policies and record racist incidents.
- Take active steps to promote good race relations between all children and explore their history, culture and language.
- Ensure appropriate inclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller resources in school libraries and within the curriculum for all pupils. (Contact TESS for guidance).
- Encourage pupils to question and challenge inaccurate or biased media reporting.
- Engage with parents and children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, encourage and empower them to take a full interest in the education system.
- Encourage all communities to identify their ethnicity in the school census data.
- If attendance is poor, find out what the inhibitors are. Offer good quality distance learning opportunities if children travel with their parents during the school year.
- Encourage people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities to become teaching assistants and school governors.
- Ensure extended school and family learning activities embrace all parents and pupils.

Resources

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month

Find out about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller history and culture, and about plans for the month.

www.grthm.co.uk

Leeds Education Gypsy, Roma and Traveller website

This website is maintained by the Gypsy Roma Traveller Achievement Service (GRTAS) in Leeds. It's for the communities, those that work with them and those that wish to find out more about them.

www.grtleeds.co.uk

The National Association of Teachers of Travellers (NATT)

Find contact details for the Traveller Education Support Services and other useful information.

www.natt.org.uk

The Irish Traveller Movement (ITM)

ITM seeks to raise the profile of Irish Travellers in Britain and increase their say in decision-making.

www.irishtraveller.org.uk

The Roma Support Group (RSG)

The RSG was established by the Roma people and is led by them today.

www.romasupportgroup.org.uk

DCSF guidance

The DCSF offers a range of guidance publications, including *The Inclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children (2008)*, *Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Gypsy Traveller Pupils (2003)* and *School Supported Distance Learning (2006)*. To download them visit <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk> and search for 'gypsy'.

Early Years Outreach Practice (2007)

Download from www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/54_3872.htm