

Supporting Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in primary schools

Promoting good practice in Lincolnshire



Introduction

This document was put together by the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Education Team to provide guidance to schools regarding the best practice for supporting Gypsy Roma and Traveller children in primary education. It draws on the experience of EMTET's collaboration with schools and families as well as current pedagogical advice. This guidance aims to highlight examples of successful initiatives and to promote inclusive approaches to supporting GRT pupils.

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Creating an Inclusive Environment

Representation and recognition of a families' cultural background can help to establish the message that their children's heritage will be valued and recognises their contribution to British culture, history and values.

Providing a warm welcome and the message that school is a safe environment can be a crucial step towards building a trusting and confident relationship. If a family sees that a school values and shows an interest in their background and culture, they may feel more confident in engaging with staff, school life and procedures.

Developing a positive relationship between home and school can have a significant impact on attendance and engagement. Although schools may have information displayed in the form of posters and leaflets and might communicate through letters and social media, these methods may not always be effective in supporting equal and informed access for families. Making adaptations to methods of communication such as face-to-face reinforcement of key information, following up with texts or coding letters to indicate which need a reply or are important, can help facilitate access.



Small measures, such as ensuring that public areas have culturally relevant displays, can help to establish a positive ethos where families will be able to see their heritage is recognised as being part of the wider British landscape. Reception areas are often the first impression that a family gain of a school so one that feels welcoming and reflects aspects of Traveller culture, for example through artefacts or photographs, acknowledges that the school recognises and values the diverse cultures of modern and historical Britain alike and is inclusive.

Whilst families may not wish to identify their Gypsy, Roma or Traveller (GRT) background, it may be an important initial step in creating an environment which promotes ascription. Ascription is a very personal decision and there may be valid concerns for a family not to share their identity; however, there are benefits if families feel confident to ascribe. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009)

Figures show that nine out of ten children from a Traveller background have suffered racial abuse and two thirds have also experienced bullying or suffered a physical attack. Family members may themselves have been bullied because of their GRT identity or be concerned that this will be experienced by their children. Creating an environment where families feel safe, valued and listened to may at least help to lessen any concerns the family might have. Likewise, it sends a message to children and families that all cultures are valued and recognised equally. Similarly, ensuring all newly-admitted families have had the Anti-Bullying Policy shared verbally with them, may offer reassurance to parents.

Even if a school has no Gypsy, Roma or Traveller children attending at the present time, reflecting their culture and recognising its place and history as part of British society can help to counter some of the more negative portrayals that children from outside the GRT community may hear and default to.



It's crucial if negative stereotypes are to be challenged that non-GRT children have the opportunities to learn about lifestyles that may be different to their own, whilst also recognising the similarities. If equality of opportunity is to be ensured, this needs to happen before GRT children even attend a school. It begins with establishing a wider school ethos that promotes positive images and role models, reflecting contributions and achievements in all areas, not just academic.

Just as with any other culture, it is important not to generalise or make assumptions, and to recognise that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are not a homogenous group. For example, not all Travellers will live in a trailer or on a site. Care must be taken not to reinforce stereotypes. Children and families are usually the best source of information and can give an individual perspective into the culture.

The Class Environment

Classrooms are an ideal place to display and make available relevant and appropriate resources, as are school libraries and corridors – anywhere where children can freely access them as part of their everyday interaction and learning.



However, the presence of culturally relevant resources isn't enough to establish an understanding of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers; rather it is an element of the wider school ethos and approach to Social Moral Cultural and Spiritual (SMCS) education and how they're actively used within an inclusive curriculum that reflects the modern and diverse British society. For example, looking for opportunities to show the contribution of Gypsies and Travellers in the war (Keet-Black, 2008-2011) when studying this topic or taking part in Traveller Gypsy Roma History Month can challenge stereotypes and help engage all pupils in exploring a rich and diverse history.

An inclusive curriculum should aim to reflect Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture whether or not the school has pupils from those ethnic groups in order to recognise diversity and meet the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. Embedding GRT culture as an integrated aspect of the curriculum rather than an isolated topic gives the strong message of belonging, and helps to link more abstract elements of formal learning in a more meaningful way for GRT children. If they are able to see their identity reflected throughout the curriculum, there is a stronger relevance and

motivation for engagement with mainstream learning. Therefore, with this in mind, exploiting the opportunities within the curriculum to address topics from a GRT perspective can only have benefits for children of all backgrounds when we consider their future as citizens of a modern and ever-changing Britain.

It is only when multicultural perspectives are embedded into the curriculum that the issue of equal opportunities is really addressed (Ivatts, 1999)

EMTET have developed a Traveller Workshop which we deliver around the county to primary schools aiming to promote the Traveller community and lifestyle in a positive way. It is available for Reception to year 6 which enables awareness to be raised throughout the school and offers a good starting point to explore the unique and historical heritage of this community.



Engaging with Gypsy and Traveller Families

Trust is key for any relationship to exist. As one of the most marginalised communities experiencing prejudice and negative stereotypes, it is understandable that Gypsy Roma and Traveller families may require time and a sensitive approach to develop good relationships with school staff and other professionals.

Gaining better understanding of the GRT culture and talking to the families about their beliefs, customs and expectations can help develop trusting relationships. Without this communication, certain actions or decisions may be open to misinterpretation, as we may be applying our own norms that are not necessarily shared by the GRT community.

Meeting at the family home, where possible, is usually a good way to initiate contact and to become aware of family life and work patterns. As it is a safe space for the family, it may allow the members to talk more freely about any challenges they may be facing.

It is important to understand the family's idea of learning and expectations of education. Learning in schools may not feel necessary to every family's lifestyle and many parents may have had bad experiences of school life in the past. In those cases, it may be helpful to discuss the advantages of formal education and to talk about opportunities, rather than focus solely on rules and procedures. To provide reassurance, the school should discuss with the parents how they will take into consideration the family's cultural needs and practices. Exploring the parents' feelings about mainstream education and explaining the benefits and relevance of formal education for Gypsy, Roma Traveller children in modern society can create a feeling of empathy and also present school as a positive option.

Families may feel more comfortable with one main contact in school rather than many. Usually mothers or other female caregivers will be directly involved with the school, but fathers play an important role in decision making. Therefore, it may be helpful to allow time for both parents to consider their decision at home, rather than expect the mother to provide an immediate answer.

Schools should be aware that some parents may not feel confident about their literacy skills and may not be familiar with school settings. Appointments in school may be daunting as some parents may not have had the experience of official meetings. When communicating with families, school staff should ensure that the information they provide is accessible and that they avoid using educational jargon.

It may be of help for some families to have someone to support them initially. EMTET staff have been able to facilitate a range of meetings with parents, teachers and other professionals. Our team has built good relationships with many Gypsy Traveller families living in Lincolnshire and provides advice and support to promote the inclusion of GRT children in education.

Improving Attendance

There are different factors that may affect the attendance of Gypsy and Traveller pupils in schools. One of the most common reasons for Gypsy and Traveller children to be absent from school is the necessity for families to travel for work purposes or in the case of transient families, restricted access to authorised stopping places. Other reasons may include cultural commitments such as weddings, funerals or craft and religious fairs.



Schools must be aware of Gypsy and Traveller families' right to travel, but should also make sure reasons for absence are for genuine cultural purposes. Specific advice for schools regarding the attendance of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children is available in the DFE document ***School attendance Guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools and local authorities*** (DFE) and also in the ***School Census 2018 to 2019: guide for schools and LAs***(DFE).

As a close-knit community, Gypsy Traveller families rely on each other for support and women often care for extended family. Older daughters may be expected to help with younger children if there are no other adults to offer support. This can lead to occasional and unplanned absence in school.

The issue of irregular attendance among Gypsy and Traveller pupils has been highlighted in many reports; however, as a team EMTET have worked with schools where successful engagement with Gypsy and Traveller families resulted in improved pupil attendance.

Strategies:

If a member of staff becomes aware that a pupil will be absent for a period of time due to travelling with their family, it is recommended to follow these steps:

- Discuss with the family the reasons for travelling.
- Establish a return date. It is possible that the family may not be able to specify the return date at this point, but will be in position to provide it at a later stage.
- Agree with the family ways of communicating during the pupil's absence.
- Provide educational resources for the travelling pupil.
- Maintain contact with the family.

Additional recommendations:

- Treat each family individually. Be sensitive to the reasons why the child may not be attending school.
- Emphasise the effect that irregular attendance will have on the child's education.
- Make sure the family have regular positive feedback when the child is in school. This can help build positive and confident relationships.
- Explain obligations regarding attendance.
- Encourage parents to be honest and try to come to an arrangement regarding acceptable reasons for taking their children out of school relating to culture.
- Remember that parents may feel guilty that they are not always able to send their child to school due to circumstances beyond their control.
- Make families feel welcome; families are often happy to introduce other family members and talk about their culture.
- Create work packs when a child is travelling or get the children/family to make a diary/journal – they may share their experience with their teacher and if appropriate, their class, on their return.

Making the Curriculum Culturally Relevant

"A culturally relevant and affirming curriculum is important for all pupils. It is particularly important for children and young people from Gypsy Traveller backgrounds to see their culture, history, language and values reflected in their school experience. All schools, whether or not Gypsy Travellers are on roll, should have resources in classrooms and libraries which give a positive view of their culture and lifestyle. This adds to the quality and accuracy of knowledge for all children."

(DfES, 2003)

The positive effect of making culturally relevant adaptations in class was evident during our work with Gypsy Traveller children in one of the Lincolnshire schools. In order to help the Gypsy Traveller children better engage with the topic of Health and Safety, we created activities which related to aspects of health and safety on a Traveller site, a familiar environment for the children.

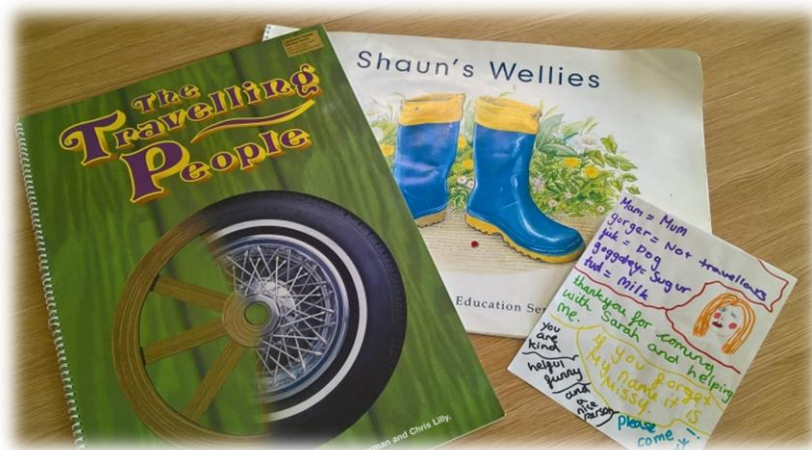
It became apparent from the initial discussion that the pupils did not associate any risks with not wearing safety equipment during potentially hazardous activities and games they are regularly involved in, such as quad biking, motor biking and horse riding. We asked the children to choose their favourite outdoor activity. They produced mind-maps of their ideas, which enabled them to present their thoughts in a spontaneous and unpressured way. It also helped the children build their confidence around the topic.

We then researched recommended safety equipment, labelled new diagrams and compared them with what the children wore during their chosen activities. This encouraged the children to discuss new ideas, changes they would make and advice they would give to younger siblings and family. Most importantly, it allowed the children to talk in an open and meaningful way about their experiences as Travellers.

Following this activity, the children were more aware of health and safety and were keen to teach younger siblings and family members. The children were motivated by the activity and requested to extend it by designing helmets for motor cycling and horse riding.

A personalised curriculum not only enhances children's learning by relating to their prior knowledge and experiences but also provides affirmation of their cultural background. This is particularly important for Gypsy Traveller communities, who are faced with negative media portrayal and often discrimination, which can lead to children struggling with self-esteem, motivation and, at times, behaviour. Inclusive and culturally relevant teaching provides opportunities for children to have their

voices heard and to feel recognised and valued for who they are. It therefore supports the Gypsy Traveller children's learning and well-being. Additionally, this approach can contribute towards schools' SMSC development by enabling all children to learn about cultures and lifestyles different from their own.



Supporting Transition to Secondary School

Although there may be reasons for some families to opt out of mainstream education after year 6, our team has successfully supported Gypsy and Traveller children with their transition to secondary schools.

EMTET involvement would usually begin in year 5 with discussions with parents and schools about options, preferences and concerns. For many families, the decision to send their child to a secondary school is a challenging one, as it may mean entering an unfamiliar environment and possibly interfering with a traditional way of living.

Bullying, prejudice and negative influences can be of real concern for the families, therefore it is essential to discuss how the children will be safeguarded in school. Primary school is often seen as a protective and nurturing place and families may need reassurance that the secondary school will provide a safe environment that cares about their children's well-being.

Families may benefit from additional visits to secondary school and from establishing a relationship with a member of staff. EMTET team can offer support with the transition process by assisting with extra visits and liaising with the new school and the family.

Although not all the children supported by our team transferred to a secondary school, the initiative helps the families make informed decisions and makes them aware of the options available for their future. In many cases, this leads to parents changing their perception of secondary schools and that in itself is a step towards transforming the status quo and paving the path for other Gypsy Traveller children to access secondary education with more confidence and in greater numbers.

In order for this process to continue and for the current situation to change, it is vitally important for schools not to assume that Gypsy Traveller children will not transfer to a secondary school, but for staff to take appropriate steps to encourage transition and to support the family.

Alternative Route – Home Education

Home education is a legal alternative to mainstream education for families of any background. Once transition to secondary school has been explored with the family and the decision is made not to proceed, school should maintain high expectations of their Traveller pupils during this transitional period. Home education is a valid educational pathway which should enjoy the same status and support as transfer to secondary school. The final months in primary school provide a great opportunity to celebrate the Gypsy Traveller children's achievements and contribution in education.

Guided by the wishes of one of the Traveller pupils supported by EMTET we created a celebration event in school to recognise her successes in Primary education and acknowledge her choices for her future learning in the home setting.

The pupil was very keen to talk about her lifestyle and culture to her class. We worked together to create a presentation based on the EMTET Traveller Awareness workshop, but personalised it to her family. The pupil researched information, created activities and set tasks for her class to complete and discuss. She wanted to celebrate and share the traditions and experiences of her family, hoping that her class friends and teachers would have a positive memory of the Traveller community.

The presentation was very positively received; the class was very engaged and enjoyed learning about the Traveller community. The session was very personal and related to their classroom friend; the children asked questions and listened attentively to her unique experiences. The feedback was very positive and demonstrated that the children had learnt many positive things about the Traveller community.

Following the presentation the school awarded the pupil with a certificate of achievement and celebrated the award during a special assembly, complimenting her on a brilliant presentation with lots of positive information. The certificate and project materials were collated to contribute to a portfolio of achievement that she could take with her to help complement her continued educational path. She felt very proud and happy that she was able to enjoy and confidently present a workshop about her lifestyle. The experience was empowering for all involved.

What was achieved through this project:

- Traveller culture was promoted in a positive way to teachers and pupils, which helped to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions.
- The pupil was left with a positive experience which will hopefully shape her future memories of school which can be shared within the Traveller community.
- The class had the opportunity to explore and learn about a community of which they may have had little or no experience.
- The pupil took responsibility for the information that was shared with the class which gave her ownership and prevented generalisations.
- The pupil felt reassured by a well-managed and structured transition.
- The pupil's choice for secondary education was valued and respected and her identity as a continuing learner was recognised.

Supporting Roma Pupils

Roma is a term used to describe Romani communities from Central and Eastern Europe and is preferred by Roma people as opposed to Gypsy. Roma share their ethnic origin with British Gypsies; however, Roma population includes many diverse groups characterised by certain cultural and dialectal differences.

Historically Romani people have been subject to persecution and as many as 400,000 Roma were murdered during the Holocaust. The experience of social exclusion and racism as well as financial deprivation continues for Roma communities across Europe and reflects the reality faced by Gypsy and Traveller families in Britain.

Schools welcoming Roma pupils should be aware of the distinct challenges that exist for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in education. It has been documented that in Eastern European countries a high percentage of Roma children experience segregation and general difficulties in accessing mainstream education. Special education may therefore be a very sensitive subject for families and should be approached with empathy.

In order to plan appropriate support for Roma pupils, teachers should gather information about the children's educational as well as linguistic background. Many Roma children are bilingual as they tend to be exposed to a Romani dialect and the official language of their home country. Individual children's competency in those languages may vary however, recognising the child as a bilingual learner provides a very important affirmation of their heritage and skills.

Integration of Eastern European Roma children should also consider support to address the language barrier that most newly arrived children face when starting school. Implementing effective strategies for children with English as an Additional Language will help accelerate the children's progress and aid inclusion. Studies have shown that Roma pupils and their families felt reassured and more integrated by having someone who speaks their home language and understands their cultural experiences working in school. Community representatives can provide an invaluable support with integration and are instrumental in bridging the gap between schools and families struggling to engage.

Romani art and culture are incredibly rich and vibrant and should certainly be celebrated in schools. By incorporating Romani history, language, music and art into their lessons, teachers can enrich the curriculum and raise the profile of Roma pupils in school. In addition to that, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month provides an excellent opportunity for pupils to further explore and celebrate Romani heritage.

Roma Support Group is a charity based in London that offers a range of workshops for schools, including story-telling, music and dance.

Good Practice Checklist:

This good practice checklist could be used as audit tool to reflect on the school's current provision for GRT pupils. EMTET are available to help schools review their practice and contribute to the School Development Plan. Our team can also offer support with individual areas of need as identified by the school.

1. The school's equality objectives include commitments towards supporting ethnic minority pupils, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.
2. The school environment is welcoming and reflective of the cultural and ethnic make-up of the school community.
3. The school ensures equal opportunities for all.
4. The school actively challenges prejudice and racism.
5. The school is aware of the children's cultural needs and makes reasonable adjustments where appropriate.
6. The school engages positively with GRT parents to create a feeling of mutual trust.
7. The school communicates with GRT parents in an accessible way.
8. GRT parents are included in the school life and understand their role in their child's educational experiences.
9. Communication with families is maintained during pupils' absence.
10. The curriculum provides opportunities for GRT pupils to make positive contributions and for everyone to explore diversity.
11. Resources reflect GRT culture and individual children's experiences.
12. Relevant information about the child is gathered to provide personalised learning opportunities.
13. The school is proactive in planning for a managed transition to secondary school.

14. Outreach support is provided where necessary.
15. The school liaises with the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Education Team to implement strategies to support Gypsy Roma and Traveller children.

Background Reading

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NATT+ Best Practice Guidance for Schools Working with Roma Children and Families

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