

Education

A Roma Perspective



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Forward

I was pleased and honoured to be asked to write a brief foreword for this valuable and timely publication. My pleasure is that it firstly gives me an opportunity to comment on the praiseworthy work that the Roma Support Group has done over many years for Roma communities in London and elsewhere. The needs of Roma communities have been growing since the nineteen eighties with the increasing number of families legally migrating to the United Kingdom for work and social integration. An important need for all families with young children is education and the inherent difficulties to overcome surrounding access to welcoming, safe and friendly schools.

With the UK's history over the past seventy or so years of becoming a very diverse society, it is a commendation of our education system that most families find it easy to access their children to such friendly schools which are now skilled at welcoming children of all different backgrounds.

From my long years as an HM Inspector of schools, I learned early on that schools are only too anxious to welcome and accommodate new children from different backgrounds, which is, of course, their professional duty. I also discovered that teachers were always seeking new information and insights about their new pupils with the aim of responding to their particular and individual learning needs. It is for this very practical reason that schools will very much appreciate this publication with its introduction to Roma communities in the UK.

The document's strength is twofold. Firstly, it informs and advises schools with good background information on how to respond to the needs of these vulnerable and marginalised communities. It also facilitates an informed understanding of the knowledge and wisdom required in applying and adapting educational practices and requirements on the everyday practical issues that schools have to deal with such as attendance, behaviour, bullying, registration and ethnic ascription, and the assessment of learning needs. Needless to say, the pages also rightly remind schools of their equality duties.

Secondly, it is a strength that the voices of Roma people, young and 'older' come clearly through the personal testimonies. Some of these are doubly interesting given that they speak both of their experience of receiving education and then their observations from a professional perspective of delivering education.

These stories are important for all schools to hear as they provide such telling and moving insights that individuals have of educational experiences in different schools and in different countries. It must be sheer music to any school to hear a 'migrant' child say, "Here education is much better. You are like a flower that is allowed to grow here. You are not contained." It would be so reassuring to the moral nature of our society if these beautiful words were whispered into the ears of tabloid journalists.

This publication concludes with sound professional advice related to the importance of the curriculum in schools to both acknowledge and affirm the history, culture and language of Roma pupils as this is crucially important to happy and successful learning, but it is also important for all children to know about Roma culture and identity. While it is wonderful that the Roma Support Group are promoting professional development in schools within the context of facilitating acceptance and understanding of communities that have suffered persecution and discrimination, it is sad that more assertive encouragement and advice is not given to schools by the Department for Education.

Arthur Ivatts OBE

Acknowledgements

Roma Support Group would like to thank all the young Roma, their families and professionals who contributed to this resource.

Roma Support Group

The Roma Support Group is a Roma-led charity working with East European Roma refugees and migrants. Since 1998, we have been working with thousands of Roma families, offering them a variety of services; engaging the Roma community in all aspects of running and managing the organisation and promoting an understanding of Roma culture in the UK.

The mission of the Roma Support Group is to improve the quality of life for Roma refugees and migrants by helping them to overcome prejudice, isolation and vulnerability. It is also our objective to make the public aware of Roma culture, heritage and the current situation of Roma refugees and migrants in the UK through cultural and informative events and publications.

The purpose of this resource

This resource is based on 17 years of projects working with Roma children, young people and their families in the area of education, aspiration and mentoring. During this time we have come across a number of inspiring young people and the dedicated professionals working to support them. However, regrettably, we continue to see situations where successful engagement can be complex and challenging.

The purpose of this resource is therefore to:



Introduce the Roma community to those who are unfamiliar;



Provide basic practical information with a view to professionals going on to develop their own understanding and body of resources;

But most importantly:



To give Roma young people a voice.

It is impossible for this to be a comprehensive resource to provide information and advice for every eventuality. Instead, it is intended as a starting point. It is our intention to add to this resource over time and welcome input from individuals and organisations, from Roma pupils, parents and education professionals who wish to share their own good practice in the area of education.

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Who are the Roma?

The Roma are the largest ethnic minority in Europe and are among the most vulnerable and marginalized. “Though they exist in all countries of Europe with a total population of approximately 12–15 million, 70 per cent are concentrated in Central/South Eastern Europe. The greatest proportions in this region live in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and TFYR Macedonia and large numbers live in the Czech Republic and Poland. They are one of the fastest growing populations in Europe, with an increasing share of the Roma population being comprised of youth.”

In the 1990s, following the fall of communism, small numbers of Roma families left Eastern Europe following increasing anti-Roma attitudes and physical attacks to claim asylum in the west. Following the EU accessions of 2004 and 2007 Roma also migrated to the UK under EU free movement of workers. There is little statistical data about Roma in the UK. However, estimates vary from 300,000 (including the Gypsy and Traveller population) to 1 million. In 2013 the University of Salford published a report which estimated there are approximately 200,000 Roma in the UK.

Although Roma are the largest ethnic group, they are worse off than most other groups when it comes to education, health, employment, housing and political participation. They have possibly the lowest educational attainment, the shortest life expectancy and a level of unemployment significantly higher than any other comparable ethnic group in Europe. The political participation of Roma is still at a very low level. For instance, there is currently only one Roma Member of the European Parliament.

Although there have been several initiatives on the European level attempting to improve the position of Roma, such as The Decade of Roma inclusion (2005-2015), they continue to suffer from widespread discrimination which feeds the cycle of their disadvantage, exclusion, segregation and marginalisation.

¹ Towards Roma Inclusion, UNICEF, Geneva, 2010, available at: www.unicef.org/ceecis/ROMA_PAPER_FINAL_LAST.pdf. Of course, all statistics depend on who self-identifies and who is identified as Roma in often very mixed populations.

² Mapping Survey: Patterns of settlement and current situation of new Roma communities in England, European Dialogue, August 2009

³ Migrant Roma in the United Kingdom – Population size and experiences of local authorities and partners, Philip Brown, Lisa Scullion and Philip Martin, University of Salford, 2013

⁴ The Hungarian Romani woman Livia Jaroka was elected as part of the Fidesz list in 2004. Jaroka was the second Roma (but one of the first Roma women, with Victoria Mohacsi, now seeking asylum in Canada) ever elected to the European Parliament; the first was Juan de Dios Ramirez Heredia from Spain, who served from 1994-1999.

Big family, eat,
have fun...it's
a way of life

When you are
Roma you have
every single
culture of the
world within you

To be Roma is to be diverse.
Not every Roma is the
same. We all have a slightly
different culture

Someone who has
thousands of years of
culture and tradition
within them

Experiences of school outside the UK

Roma children attending UK schools can present with varied experiences of formal education. While many may have attended school in their country of origin you will find children who have not. The process of moving country, starting school and learning a new language simultaneously can be an anxious time for both the young person and their parents. It is therefore vital that their first experience of school is a positive one.

The school system in most East European countries is very different from the UK. Differences include the age at which children start school, the nature of the school day and expectations around attendance and reporting illness.

This resource cannot provide a comprehensive guide on school systems across Europe but here are some general points to note:



Early years and starting school

Many Roma families will have little experience of nursery within their countries of origin. This is due to a combination of factors including a lack of pre-school places, the associated cost including transport and institutional discrimination which prevents them from being welcomed into what limited early years settings may be available in their local area. It should also be noted that in many East Europe countries children do not start primary school until the age of 6 or sometimes 7. It is therefore important that you advise parents of what early years provision is available to them in the UK along with practical support such as admissions paperwork and introductions to local children's centre and nurseries. Parents will also need to be made aware that they need to apply for admission to reception before the national deadline and not wait until the start of the academic year.



Transition

Transition from primary to secondary school is a significant life achievement for all children but this can be a particularly worrying time for a Roma child. DfE data on transition for GRT pupils is regrettably out of date but in *Improving the Outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Pupils: final report* published in 2010 it notes that 'Just over half of the cohort of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils identified in Year 6 in 2003, and recorded as white Irish Traveller (WIRT) or white Roma/Gypsy (WROM) at some point during their secondary school experience, were still attending school in Year 11 (in 2008)... Roma pupils with EAL had the highest retention rate, with just over 63% remaining in school until statutory leaving age'. Primary schools with Roma pupils due to transition to secondary should therefore pay

particular attention to supporting these families and ensure liaison with the new secondary school to smooth the way to a successful start in year 7. It is worth noting that in many East European countries a child is expected to achieve a certain grade before they are permitted to move into the year above. Many parents will not therefore be familiar with the UK system in which children continue to progress from one year to the next irrespective of attainment. For further guidance on transition and retention we recommend Guidance on Improving Secondary Transition and Retention for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Pupils produced by Cambridgeshire Race Equality and Diversity Service.



Attendance and sickness

Many Roma families who have attended school in Eastern Europe will be used to a system where attendance is not monitored as closely as it is in the UK. Providing a short note is given to the school, an absence will be authorised. There is no requirement to meet a certain percentage of attendance in an academic term and meetings about attendance are less frequent. It is therefore good practice to discuss expectations on attendance and procedures for reporting absences as early as possible before a problem becomes apparent.



Segregated and special needs schooling

There has been both a historical and continuing issue with segregated schooling for Roma children in some Eastern European states. This can be due to the geographical location of Roma families mainly on the edges of towns and villages or in some cases where non-Roma parents choose to remove their children from a school with increasing numbers of Roma children.

Roma children also experience segregation through the use of special needs schools. Before starting primary school children are required to take basic tests in the official language of the country. As most Roma children speak Romanes at home and have not yet developed the official language of their country of origin, the child performs poorly and can be assigned a special needs school. The consequence is that many Roma have had a restricted curriculum which has focused on limited vocational training rather than literacy. This practice continues despite judgments from the European Court of Human Rights. For example, in September 2014 the European Commission initiated infringement proceedings against the Czech Republic for breaching European Union anti-discrimination legislation in relation to segregated schooling of Roma children [quote]. It is therefore extremely important to consider the educational experiences of Roma parents as this will have a direct impact on the methods you use to engage with them effectively and how you build a positive home/school relationship.

For a recent comparative study of experiences of education for Roma across European states see the research from The Rromani People's Learning Leaders Project and more specifically 'The European Report - The Rromani people in Europe in 2014'⁷ which includes an assessment of experiences of Roma in the UK.

⁷Available at: <http://www.romalearningleaders.eu/src/uploads/2014/11/EU-Final-Report-con-portada-xa-web.pdf>

Ascription – A Roma perspective

Many Roma families choose not to ascribe as Roma. There remains an underlying fear of discrimination based on their ethnicity. Their experiences of segregated school and racist attacks in their countries of origin are well documented. Sadly this experience can continue within the UK:

“I am proud to be Roma but I see so many things in newspapers, I see people talking in the street about how Gypsies are bad people. If one person does something bad we are all said to be bad.

In every situation in life, even when I was homeless and went to the council for help, I have been discriminated against once they find out I am Roma. That is the reason I do not choose to tell my children’s school that we are Roma. It is to protect them”

(Romanian Roma Parent)

However, improving ascription rates is particularly important given the lack of data on the number of Roma children within local authority areas and as a result the difficulty in evidencing need for specialist services.

Self-identification will always be a sensitive topic for many Roma and a decision not to ascribe must always be respected. Engaging effectively with Roma families is about building trust and ascription is a prime example. However, there are practical things you can do as a school to improve ascription rates as follows:



Have Roma as a distinct category on your ethnic monitoring form - Make sure to list Roma as a separate category from Gypsy or Traveller. Many Roma do not use the word Gypsy and by extension many English Gypsy families do not identify with the term Roma.



Help to physically complete the form with parents assuring them of how this data is kept confidential and the reason the data is collected.



Train ALL staff including reception and admissions staff who are likely to be the first point of contact for Roma families new to your school.



A school that slowly creates a relationship of trust with its Roma families will see increased rates of ascription. Studies have shown that schools that employ Roma liaison workers also have a greater rate of ascription.⁹



Never force anybody to ascribe. Individual choice should always be respected.

For further information and advice on ascription for Roma pupils we recommend reading a range of sources such as 'What's working for Roma in School - A Network Learning Book'¹⁰ and 'Improving education outcomes for pupils from the new Roma communities'¹¹. We also recommend taking a look at the website of your local Traveller Education Service or Education Service for New Communities who have a wealth of experience in this area.

⁸See Amnesty International reports : Injustice Renamed – Discrimination in education of Roma persists in the Czech Republic, Amnesty International (Jan 2010); Unfulfilled promises: failing to end segregation of Roma pupils in Slovakia, Amnesty International (Sep 2013); and Must try harder: ethnic discrimination against Romani children in Czech schools, Amnesty International (Apr 2015).

⁹Mapping Survey: Patterns of settlement and current situation of new Roma communities in England, European Dialogue, August 2009

¹⁰Jane Murphy, Manchester City Council, September 2013

¹¹Mark Penfold, Babington College, February 2015

The Equality Act 2010

Ofsted and prejudice based bullying

Prejudice based bullying can have a significant future impact on the welfare of any child and remains one of the most significant factors in Roma children missing education.

All schools are subject to the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which requires schools to have **due regard¹² to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations** for pupils, staff and others using school facilities.

The Department for Education has produced non-statutory guidance for schools to help them fulfil their duties under the Act. As well as the general PSED, schools also have two specific duties under the Act¹³:



To publish information which shows compliance with the PSED and



To publish equality objectives

In addition, all schools must have a behaviour policy in place that includes measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. Staff must act to prevent discrimination, harassment and victimisation within the school generally including towards Roma pupils.

Given the higher percentage of racist incidents reported by Roma as well as Gypsy and Traveller children in comparison to the size of the GRT population in schools as a whole, it is good practice for schools to include a reference to Roma as well as Gypsies and Travellers within their behaviour policy as a way of demonstrating their commitment to eradicating this form of bullying.

The new Ofsted framework which came into effect on 1 January 2012 is clear that inspectors expect schools to keep detailed records of all prejudice-related incidents.

‘inspectors will evaluate...pupils’ behaviour towards, and respect for, other young people and adults, including freedom from bullying and harassment that may include cyber-bullying and prejudice-based bullying related to special educational need, sexual orientation, sex, race, religion and belief, gender reassignment or disability’

In January 2013 Ofsted published *Inspecting equalities*, to help inspectors judge the impact of schools’ work in advancing equality of opportunity, fostering good relations and tackling discrimination under the Equality Act 2010.

This requires that:

‘There are clear procedures for dealing with prejudice-related bullying and incidents, and appropriate staff training that equips staff to identify and deal with this effectively’.

To this end:

‘The school should also be taking active steps to promote its relationships with all parents and pupils and also those in communities or from groups that it finds hard to reach’.

For more information on first hand experiences of racist bullying of Roma, as well as Gypsy and Traveller children, we recommend reading ‘This is who we are – a study of the experiences of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children throughout England’¹⁶.

¹²The Brown Principles

¹³Equality Act Guidance, Department for Education, October 2012 available at: www.education.gov.uk/aboutdfe/policiesandprocedures/equalityanddiversity/f00215460/equality-act-2010-departmental-advice.

¹⁴Inspecting Equalities, Ofsted, January 2013, Ref: 090197, para. 39

¹⁵Inspecting Equalities, Ofsted, January 2013, Ref: 090197, para. 30

¹⁶See *This is Who We Are – A study of the views and identities of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller young people in England*, Heather Ureche and Myfanwy Franks, The Children’s Society, 2007.

Working with Roma pupils in UK schools – Learning from those with experience



ADRIAN

I have been working in schools for over 6 years now. I came to the UK in 2002 with my mother and sister and attended school in East London. Based on my own experiences at school I decided to develop my career in education. I now work with young people who are underachieving in school, mostly but not exclusively Roma and I also help design interventions for the EAL department. I'm really proud of the support I have been able to give in this capacity and have seen some of my pupils go from a U grade to Ds and Cs and above and then move onto college and successful careers. One young person I worked with has started their own business.

Over the years I have learnt that success for Roma pupils lies in parental engagement. If you don't get parents on board with school life from the beginning you are going to struggle. In school we often don't appreciate the experiences that Roma parents have had themselves and how this impacts on their view of education for their children or how much they trust the school to protect their children while they are in their care. A significant proportion of education professionals are still not aware that some Roma children are coming to the UK from segregated schooling in their countries of origin. Roma children are automatically put into 'special schools' regardless of whether they have disabilities or not. As a result, they can find it hard to settle into UK schools and are expected to be like everybody else when they have never been included before.

It's easy to dismiss this as a European issue but this legacy impacts on our local schools and we have to understand this context for Roma parents and pupils. I believe the best way to tackle this is knowledge and going back to basics. Newly arrived Roma pupils may not understand English, are not used to the bell, putting their hand up to go to the toilet or any of the rules about uniform. It's easy to judge, but imagine yourself in that situation. How anxious you would feel.

It's very easy for Roma children to become the trouble makers in some schools. Not everyone fits into the mainstream box and when this happens they often end up in an alternative provision when this could have been prevented with the right support. When we are working in a busy school environment we can often get lost in meetings with parents and our frustrations that progress is slow and the children themselves are forgotten when they're the ones who are suffering the most. We still have work to do here in our schools.

Valentina



I have been working with Roma children in UK schools for the last 6 years and previously worked with Roma children in Romania. In my current school I have worked closely with the local authority's GRT advisory teacher as well as staff from other local schools. My role is varied and involves supporting Roma pupils in class, induction groups for new arrivals, booster groups for reading and phonics as well as investing time working directly with parents.

The main difficulty we had to begin with in engaging with Roma families was communication. It was difficult to have any kind of dialogue with parents on attendance and behaviour but also some incidents of racist bullying experienced by the Roma children at first. Most of the parents could not speak English and could not read and write at all. Communication had to be done face to face in Romanian as they could not read letters sent home and would often worry what the letters contained. My role means that all communication is now by telephone, by speaking to me in the playground at home time or for some parents who are literate by written notes in Romanian which I can translate for the class teachers.

This work has been of great benefit to the school as it has enabled them to build a relationship of trust with the families. We quickly get to know the cause of any problems and make sure the picture school gets is a correct one and not based on assumptions. The families realise I am here to support them.

In my experience the key to engaging successfully with Roma children and their parents is to have more knowledge about who they and their past experiences. There is still a lot of confusion around the difference between Roma and Romanian and that Roma have their own language. With this knowledge schools can find the right support for individual pupils. Working with Roma children can be challenging but no more so than with any other child. It's about taking time and finding the right way to do it.



I am an Advisor for Gypsy Roma Traveller Education and Ethnic Minority Achievement within a local authority and have been working with Roma pupils for over 15 years. My role is to raise attainment and achievement and I do this through a multi-agency approach with schools, other local authority services and NGOs and community led groups and the Roma children and families themselves. Working with community organisations in particular has allowed me to develop the skills and knowledge of my local authority and to learn about the many different Gypsy, Traveller and Roma groups who are living and attending school in our authority.

It has been important to raise cultural awareness, understanding and empathy, develop ascription and inclusion through supportive strategies and using projects such as the H.E.A.R.T (Help Educate All Roma Together) Redbridge and Romanian schools joint project as well as art and dance projects and parent and child reading projects. It is also vital to develop staff confidence and relationships with Roma children and their families through meetings in school and during home visits. Over time, Roma families in the borough have come to realise they can trust and be confident in my work with them.

It can be difficult for some Roma families to engage in school life at first. Parents are not always confident in a school environment, may lack of confidence speaking English and have low trust in a system they don't understand. This is especially the case when they are called into school for meetings and are not sure who all the different professionals they are meeting are and schools often only have negative things to report about their child

Schools often lack the cultural and historical knowledge of who the Roma are and are unable to understand the different challenges families face daily – racism, economic, health and housing, or adapting to UK life. Roma children are incredibly special for their amazing determination to survive against all obstacles and oppression. Roma children in Redbridge schools are eager to learn, take part and be acknowledged for their success. The key requirement for schools to work successfully with Roma pupils is an openness to welcoming Roma pupils into their school, seeing them as an asset to the school community and a learning opportunity for everyone to find out about and understand Roma culture better while meeting Roma pupil's individual needs and situations.

The efforts made within Redbridge schools to support Roma pupils have helped schools to develop successful strategies for new arrival Roma children and families, including welcoming, early induction and EAL interventions supporting learning. Schools with high numbers of Roma pupils have also engaged bilingual teaching assistants and realised the learning benefits this has had for children, parents and the school. We have recently delivered a successful community interpreting training for Roma community members to help them find employment in schools and other local authority services.

An Inter-generational view on education



EDEK

When working with Roma families it is important to be aware of the historical context and how this will have impacted on different generations of the family. One Polish Roma family has kindly shared their perspectives ranging from communist rule in Poland in the 1950s to refugee status in the UK in the 1990s and how the youngest member of their family is experiencing education in the UK today.

My name is Edek, I am Polish Roma and am 63 years old. Life would be easier if I could speak English like my grandson. It was very different for me when I was his age. I played truant a lot and in Poland in the 1950s under communist rule we were taught to speak Russian not English. At this time it was compulsory for all children to attend school but there was also a lot of racism from teachers towards Roma and from people in general. Even if a Roma pupil was clever the teacher would try and stop them from progressing. There was also a lot of physical punishment in school. My school was not segregated and just for Roma, but Roma children were picked out and treated more harshly. I remember one teacher saying “I would shoot all Roma if I could”. I have many bad memories from my time at school in Poland.

When I finished school at 16 I went straight into a state supplied job. That is how things were in Poland then. There was no room for aspirations. Even if you dared to dream it was pointless because those dreams could never be realised. Even after the end of communist rule this situation remained the same for Roma and that is why we decided to come to the UK.

Here education for Roma is much better. You are like a flower that is allowed to grow here. You are not contained. There are a lot of positives about schools in the UK. One is the level of security of children. In Poland schools are very open and anybody can access them. It is very important to Roma people that their children are safe at school.

Roma people see the opportunities available and they want their children to attend school. When they leave school they should have practical skills and be able to read and write in English so that they can find jobs, have a home and look after their families. Our traditions must still be passed from one generation to the next but we also have to attend school as this is important. Other communities who have arrived to the UK from African and Asian communities have learnt to combine education with teaching their children about their culture and traditions. Roma people must now do this too.

Krzystof

My name is Krzystof and I am 38 years old. I came to the UK in 1998 with my family. We sought asylum in the UK from the racist attacks and experiences we had back in Poland because we are Roma. I attended school in Poland but did not finish. I experienced lots of problems with other children in the school and there were frequent fights. I did not take school seriously in Poland as I felt there was no future for me there. You go to school and they hate you. The other pupils and the teachers. You get pushed around just for making eye contact. You get to the point where you know what is waiting for you every morning at school. Here you might end up with a detention, there they would hit you. It got to the point where I was too scared to go. There were problems outside of school as well. The police would pick us up for anything because we were Roma. If anything happened we would always be the first to be blamed. We had to find a new life because if we stayed we would have no future.

It is important to me that my son has the educational and work opportunities that I never had. I cannot read and write properly and I feel disabled because of it. I have found it difficult to build a positive relationship with my son's school. I go in when I am invited but this is not very often as he is never in trouble. When I do go they talk and I listen. I am very anxious when I go and do not find it welcoming. Especially with the staff on reception. Occasionally when I have not been happy about something to do with my son's education I have struggled to communicate this. When I am anxious I struggle to find the correct words in English. However, in general I am very happy with the school. I like that if my son has done something good they call me to let me know.

SEWERYN

My name is Seweryn and I am 13 years old and I am Polish Roma. I go to secondary school which I enjoy very much. My favourite subjects are drama and science. Drama because you get to interact with other people and make friends. Science because the teacher is really funny and makes us laugh. My worst subject is French because I find it hard and it isn't fun. I believe that my education is important because without education you can do nothing in life. For example get a job. To be a manager in a factory you need an education or to be a bank manager. You need to be able to read and write in English.

There are not any other Roma children in my school. There is one Polish person but no Roma. I do not tell people at school that I am Roma because they would not know what this means. When I am older I would like to be a game designer or something to do with computers or a mechanic. Basically anything that's practical and about how things work.

Roma women's perspectives on education

Ewelina



I am a Polish Roma woman and I have lived in the UK for the past 16 years. In my city in Poland there were not many Roma families so the school I attended had mixed classes. I had a very happy time in primary school and there were only 4 or 5 of the children who did not like me and said they did not want to play with me because I am dark and a gypsy. I do remember how some of the children beat up my cousin David on our way home one day. They pushed him to the ground and were punching and kicking him and calling him a gypsy. I ran on home to my grandmother's house and she came running down the street in her apron, covered in flower and with her slippers on and a large wooden spoon in her hand. We laugh about it now but it was a very upsetting experience at the time.

It was not until I was a young teenager and started attending college that I really experienced racism on a regular basis. I was the only Roma person in the college and I was often pointed out by teachers as the Roma girl. If I was sick they said I was lying and it was because I was gypsy and did not want to go to school. I remember my history teacher would always ask me difficult questions in front of the class about topics we had not yet studied to make me look stupid. This stopped me from wanting to go and so my attendance became poor.

In Poland I don't believe it will ever be normal to be a Roma. When I went to visit family just 3 weeks ago it was exactly the same. Because there are still not many Roma in my city people notice me and shout things like "oh look there's a gypsy" and when we went into the shops the assistants would follow behind us checking we were not stealing anything. They're not even discreet about it, they're bent right over your shoulder!

When I was 16 me, my mother and my brother came to the UK to seek asylum. Very shortly after we arrived the 2004 EU accession happened, our NAS support payments ceased and I had to go out to work to look after the 3 of us. As I was 16 education was no longer compulsory and so I went to work and thought no more about it. However, a couple of years later I was offered a job at Roma Support Group as an advice worker and I was given the opportunity to do more than cleaning and child minding work. My dream had always been to help other people like me who had struggled in life and needed advice and support. This was the chance to realise my dream.

It is important to me that I am a working Roma mother. I can do something for me and not

just stay at home with the stereotypical life of cooking and cleaning. It's not an easy job. Some of the service users don't always treat me with the respect I should have as a Roma woman because I am out working. Some still have old fashioned views that because I am married and a mother I should be at home. It could be seen as a risk to me reputation and respect but my family and my husband support me.

Attitudes towards education are definitely changing, especially towards girls accessing further education including university. Young Roma women are more aware of what they want, have more role models from their own community and do not want the same lives as their mothers and grandmothers. Their fathers do not want their children to experience the anxiety and distress of bringing up a family in a country where you do not speak the same language and cannot read letters and forms. As more and more young Roma women do this, then more will gradually follow and it will become the norm. It only takes one Roma woman to cross that bridge and others will follow. But this change has to be led by the community itself and it takes time. It will happen though, look at me, I am about to take my driving test soon!

Victoria

My early experiences of education were quite unsettled with large gaps in my school attendance when we were travelling. However, I always pushed my mother to let me go to school whenever we were staying anywhere long enough. Even though deep down I wanted to go to school and learn I felt as though I wasn't equipped to do so. I didn't have much experience of the structure of school life and the frame of mind for studying. However, my favourite subjects were always chemistry and physics and I tried really hard with these.

In November 1989, when I was 12 years old, we travelled from Poland to Germany. This is such a vivid memory for me as we arrived on the day the Berlin wall came down. I was still too young to really understand what was going on but I just remember all the noise and people celebrating but that it was so cold. Somebody was supposed to meet us but they did not arrive and we had to wait for four days and nights in the station. It was the first time I had seen escalators and me and my brother passed the time playing on them just going up and down, up and down until we were asked to stop. While we were in Germany I did not attend school but when we returned to Poland a few years later I made the decision to go back to college and started to think about my future.

My experiences in college depended very much on the individual teacher I had in the class and there were many times where I was discouraged in my studies. I had a good friend called Anya who was not Roma but we would sit next to each other and often do our homework together. We would often have the same answers but Anya would always get better grades than me. I think it had probably always been the case without me knowing and when I got to an age where I could understand this was happening I found it very hurtful. At times I felt as though I just shouldn't bother.

I think that now in the UK we have to try and support parents with their children's education. I can see that older generations are now pushing their children to succeed at school and some Roma are now very educated. However, that is not the case for everybody. There still needs to be a bridge between parents and teachers as Roma children will always do what their parents want. We need to help to educate parents who have likely had the same experiences as me and worse. I think the UK emphasis on attendance is very good for Roma children though. My aspirations for the future are to be happy, healthy and fulfilled. I would like to spend time helping other Roma people to understand they can achieve more despite the obstacles that may have been put in their way.

Mentoring Roma young people

Roma Support Group has a long and positive experience of supporting Roma young people through the provision of mentoring. Our recommendations are as follows:

1. Working within the home environment is always more successful and ensures a sustained engagement from the pupil, their parents and the extended family unit.
2. Be consistent – even if the family is not to begin with! You will become a regular and reliable feature in their weekly schedule and this will build trust.
3. Respect the family home – As with any community, it is an honour to be invited into the family home, but even more so with a community that has been consistently excluded like the Roma. The family will wish to host you and offer refreshments. It is polite and respectful to accept these if you can.
4. The overall aim of your involvement should be to develop the individual pupil's self-image and confidence as a learner rather than to complete specific tasks each session. This will provide a foundation for learning which can be built on during formal school time.
5. Spend some time at the beginning of your session asking them about their school day. Do they have any particular achievements at school they would like to tell you about? This will also provide the opportunity for them to feel comfortable to tell you about what they may not be so confident with at school and thereby identify skills you can work on together.
6. Be flexible – you may need to modify an activity in order to engage the individual. You may need to have a few alternative tasks with you and see which works.
7. Resources do not have to be expensive – Many Roma young people are aware of current affairs and interested in discussing the world around them. A simple newspaper cutting can provoke conversation which can lead onto a related literacy based task.
8. The Roma community has a history of oral story telling. One home tutor has developed the confidence of a pupil by asking them to tell him a story which he then transcribes. The pupil then has to read back their story to develop their reading skills, their understanding of what they were reading and general enjoyment of the written word. This has slowly developed their confidence to select books from the library and read these during their sessions together.
9. Keep a short written record of each visit as a method of tracking progress. It may seem slow to begin with but over the course of the year you will be able to see how the pupil has progressed in both self-confidence and willingness to engage with their educational development in a positive manner.
10. It is likely that parents will ask you to read letters for them if they cannot read in English. It is ok to do this, and if anything will help you to gain trust, but be clear that you only have a short period of time at the end of your session to do this and you are visiting to work specifically with their child. It's also useful to find out what local advice services exist in your area and sign post the family to these.
11. It will always be more successful where funding allows, to have educational advocacy support alongside your sessions so as to engage directly with school and understand what progress they are also seeing from your interaction. This can even be helpful on a practical level if a pupil is simply failing to understand what homework is being set for them and when it is due.

A Roma parents view of mentoring

Having Jeremy mentor my children has made a huge difference to our lives. Before, my children would struggle with their homework and I would feel powerless to help them. My own education was not good. I only attended school in Romania for a few years and I can only read and write in basic Romanian. Even though my older children were also educated in the UK they did not achieve the same standards my younger children have done with the help of Jeremy. I want people to be proud of my children and with how well they are doing in school I can now relax and be proud of them. Mentoring is exactly what other Roma children need.



A mentor's view

I enjoy visiting my Roma mentees each week. It is not possible for me to help with every piece of homework the children have but that is not really what my role as a mentor is about. I spend time asking the children about their day, what they enjoyed at school, what is happening next week such as school trips or tests and help them prepare for this by informing mum and dad and making sure their school bag is packed with the right equipment. I often read letters that have come home from school and empower mum and dad to engage with school this way and feel they are a part of their children's education and not excluded from the process. I am thankful to all the families I visit as they make me so welcome in their homes.

Celebrating Roma culture within your school

There are many ways to increase knowledge of Roma communities within your school. Examples include:



During PSHE classes



Roma Culture Workshops



Purchasing resources for the school library



Celebrate GRT history month in June each year (see the Natt+ website for their competitions and links resources produced by various GRT organisations across the country)



Inclusion of Roma Holocaust in history or PSHE classes.

It is useful to make contact with your local Traveller Education Service or Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service operating within your local authority as they are likely to advise you on appropriate resources and in some cases come into school to run activities for both pupils and staff.

For more ideas on how to celebrate GRT history month in your school see: www.grthmlondon.org.uk and www.grthm.natt.org.uk/whatis.php

Important Dates

(make into a timeline down the side of this page which can be about celebrating Roma culture in your school)



Top Tips for teachers from Roma young people

1. “Talk more in schools about Roma. Just like we do in Religious Education about other groups of people.”
2. “Have more training for teachers about who European Roma are and the difference between us and Gypsy and Traveller communities in the UK so they feel more comfortable to talk about this.”
3. “Always respond when you hear derogatory language and remarks made about us at school and show other pupils this is not acceptable.”
4. “School policies about racism should make specific reference to anti-gypsyism because so many people still do not understand this is also racism.”
5. “Allow girls who wish to wear long skirts the freedom to do so just as some schools allow children from different faiths to wear certain clothing.”
6. “Don’t encourage the stereotypes by assuming that education is not important to us. This may be the case for some young people but speak to us as individuals and ask us what we want.”
7. “Be careful about where you put paperwork which may state our ethnicity. If we feel confident to say we are Roma to school staff it doesn’t always mean we want other pupils to know.”
8. “Family is very important to Roma people and we will always respect our parent’s wishes. School is much easier for us when there is a good relationship between our teachers and home. Especially when we want to go on school trips and our parents are worried about us!”

Further Resources

Guides and reports:

'Injustice Renamed – Discrimination in education of Roma persists in the Czech Republic', Amnesty International, January 2010.

'Unfulfilled promises: failing to end segregation of Roma pupils in Slovakia' Amnesty International, September 2013.

'Must try harder: ethnic discrimination against Romani children in Czech schools', Amnesty International, April 2015

'Overcoming barriers: ensuring that Roma children are fully engaged and achieving in education', Ofsted, December 2014.

'Educational Equality for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children and Young People in the UK', Brian Foster and Peter Norton, The Equal Rights Review, Vol. Eight (2012)

'How Babington Community College engages with the Roma community', available at: www.babington.leicester.sch.uk

'Improving education outcomes for pupils from the new Roma communities', Mark Penfold, British Council, February 2015

'What's working for Roma in School - A Network Learning Book', Jane Murphy, September 2013

'Best Practice Guidance for Schools Working with Roma Children and Families', National Association of Teachers of Travellers and Other Professionals – available at www.natt.org.uk/
Out of Site Education Pack, Show Racism the Red Card available at www.srtrc.org

'Raising Eastern European Gypsy/Roma Achievement – A Guide for Educational Practitioners', Bolton Council

Open Society Foundations - Gypsies, Roma, Travellers: An Animated History –available at www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/gypsies-roma-travellers-animated-history

Websites:

Roma Support Group – www.romasupportgroup.org.uk

National Association of Teachers of Travellers + Other Professionals (NATT+)
www.natt.org.uk

Advisory Council for the Education of Romany and other Travellers (ACERT)
www.acert.org.uk

Traveller Movement - www.travellermovement.org.uk

Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month – www.grthm.natt.org.uk

GRT History Month London - www.grthmlondon.org.uk