
Improving the outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Pupils: final report

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Introduction

The issue of improving educational outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller¹ pupils has been a focus of research and policy for some time and is particularly serious for secondary age pupils. Evidence suggests that where Gypsy and Traveller pupils do transfer successfully to secondary school, their attendance is unlikely to continue beyond the age of 14 (DfES 2006a; Derrington and Kendall, 2004).

Although there is some evidence of growing economically and educationally successful Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities (Ryder and Greenfield, forthcoming), there is still concern that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils are reported to be amongst the lowest achieving ethnic groups within schools in England, are more likely to be identified as having special educational needs (SEN), and are four times more likely than any other group to be excluded from school as a result of their behaviour (DfES, 2005; DCSF, 2009a).

It is within this context that the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (now the Department for Education [DfE]) funded the present study by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), which examined the issues faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils and what can be done to improve educational outcomes for this group.

Key messages from the research

The current situation:

- Findings from this study are a further reminder to policy makers and those responsible for providing education that much more needs to be done to achieve equality in educational opportunities for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils. Without a framework of targeted support at both local and national levels, the improvement of outcomes for these pupils is likely to remain unacceptably slow.
- Local authorities need robust strategies to engage with pupils who are not on the rolls of schools, to ensure that their educational entitlement is safeguarded. Policy makers, schools and other agencies also need to consider a variety of ways of increasing the expectations of all stakeholders (including teachers, pupils and parents) and maximising pupils' emotional well-being, both of which are believed to underpin improvements in attainment, attendance and retention.

¹ Throughout this Research Brief, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller is used as an umbrella term embracing all Gypsy and Traveller groups as well as Roma from Eastern and Central Europe. Within this, Roma is a generic term used to describe many different groups of Romani people including, for example, Gypsies, Tsiganes, Sinti Kalé, and Romanichal.

- The maintenance of scripts (common responses or phrases used by participants) can have a positive or a limiting effect on outcomes. Developing relationships of trust through dialogue with families and community groups is important, so that community and parental scripts can be used as a way of opening positive discussion, rather than acting as a barrier to it.
- The concentration of Gypsy Roma and Traveller pupils in schools that achieve below average results needs to be addressed at strategic and policy levels. Future research could usefully examine the characteristics and educational experiences of high attaining pupils from these communities.

The issue of transfer:

- A co-ordinated response between primary schools, secondary schools and local authorities is essential in order to further improve transfer rates and maintain pupil engagement through the secondary phase. Consistent messages and expectations relating to secondary transfer need to be coupled with targeted support for families and pupils, including those with a history of non-transfer in the immediate and/or extended family and those who are highly mobile.
- Attention needs to focus on challenging the negative impacts of the scripts and assumptions accepted by both schools and communities around perceptions and beliefs of the inevitability and appropriateness of attitudes, decisions and actions in relation to non-transfer. Sensitive outreach work and proactive relationship building between secondary schools and communities are fundamental pre-requisites to address non-transfer.
- There may also be greater potential for school staff and other professionals to take the opportunity to work with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities to increase understandings of the importance of transfer (as well as educational achievement and attainment). Key elements of this should include: increased dialogue; the employment of community members in schools; and the promotion of 'success stories' of young people who have benefited from effective transition and progression through different phases of educational provision.

Retention:

- There is a need for a continued and consistent emphasis on high expectations and aspirations. This finding could be useful in challenging common scripts used by both families and schools. Alongside challenging the barriers and scripts that prevent or limit continued educational engagement, there remains the need to stress the importance and value of completing education.
- In the future, the message of education's validity and relevance to young people is helped by offering a personalised, vocational and flexible curriculum, as well as opening minds to professional career routes (that can be supportive and useful to their own community).
- The use of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller role models to promote this message of aspiration and achievement in schools and in the community is a particularly important strategy, and one that could be further developed. Above all, given that successful retention was associated with inclusive schools that reached out to parents, working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents in equal partnership remains crucial.

Ascription:

- TESS coordinators who represented LAs in the case-study visits made it clear that they were not dependent on ethnic ascription alone to identify families. Usually they had close links with families, extended family groups, community organisations and other agencies. In any reorganisation of LA services, it is important that these services are able to respond with the same flexibility based in relationships of trust and broad safeguarding objectives.

Social and emotional well-being:

- Psycho-social factors are central to the question of raising outcomes. Schools need to fully recognise that, if Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils are unhappy in school, they are unlikely to attend or achieve. Social difficulties may lead pupils to self-exclude or behave in a manner that results in exclusion.
- It is crucial that schools seek and listen to the voices of pupils who are vulnerable to academic underachievement in order to monitor the effectiveness of their inclusion policy. Ensuring appropriate levels of funding to facilitate effective pastoral support for such pupils is likely to be important.

The principles for improvement:

- Each school will need to understand the impact of its context and focus its efforts accordingly. The TARGET model described within this report may thus be helpful to schools in analysing and determining their next steps.
- Local authorities and central government may need to monitor levels of engagement, exclusion and SEN identification to establish whether progress is being made locally and nationally to ensure pupils from these communities have the opportunities to reach their full potential.

Methodology

The research had four distinct methodological strands:

- Strand one: analysis of national attainment, attendance and exclusions data for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils (Key Stage 2-4) compared to a control group of similar pupils.
- Strand two: progress mapping through questionnaires sent twice to primary and secondary schools with relatively high numbers of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils during the course of the study (in 2007 and 2009).
- Strand three: A review of UK and international literature over the last ten years.
- Strand four: In-depth case-study visits to 15 schools (ten secondary and five primary) and five alternative education providers. Researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with senior leaders and other key staff from schools and local authorities and held focus group discussions with pupils, parents and teachers.

Key findings

Attainment

Our statistical analysis using the National Pupil Database (NPD) shows that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils usually attend schools with lower than average rates of achievement. Forty per cent of Gypsy Roma and Traveller pupils with only Key Stage (KS) 2 SAT results (suggesting they had disrupted education) attend schools in the lowest quintile (fifth) of attainment.

Pupils with missing key stage test data had higher rates of Free School Meals eligibility, suggesting a connection between poverty and disrupted educational experience. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils are reported to have the highest level of Special Educational Needs of all ethnic minority groups, and this may be the result of families lacking information or experiencing problems accessing appropriate health care, or schools failing to respond appropriately to cultural difference. Overall, the fact that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils tend to have low prior attainment, have Special Education Needs and are entitled to Free School Meals is likely to be affected by cultural factors.

Attendance and exclusions

Nationally, in both the primary and secondary phases, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils have significantly higher levels of absence from school than pupils from other ethnic groups. Travellers of Irish heritage in both primary and secondary schools have slightly more absences than either Gypsy/Roma pupils², or Roma pupils with English as an additional language (EAL). Gypsy/Roma pupils have the lowest level of overall absence.

The rate of permanent exclusion in 2007/08 was highest for Gypsy/Roma (0.56% of the school population) and Travellers of Irish heritage (0.53% of the school population) ethnic groups. A breakdown by gender clearly reveals the over-representation of boys in these figures. Similarly, the rate of fixed-term exclusion in 2007/08 was highest for Gypsy/Roma (18.71% of the school population) and Travellers of Irish heritage (16.65%) ethnic groups. Again, boys are over-represented in these figures.

Transfer and transition

There are a range of variables that obstruct and support the transfer and transition of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils. One of the biggest challenges was the common responses, or scripts, used consistently by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities to justify actions for non-transfer.

The case studies highlighted a great deal of good practice around dialogue with parents for transfer in the primary phase. To maximise this success, this may be an area in which secondary school staff could increase their involvement. There was a sense that community attitudes were (in some cases) beginning to shift and there was a greater recognition among parents and pupils of the need for a secondary and post-16 education. There may be opportunities for school staff and other professionals to build on this and contribute to changing 'hearts and minds' in relation to attitudes and behaviours surrounding non-transfer.

Retention

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. However, Travellers of Irish heritage left school earlier than the other groups, with only 38% reaching statutory leaving age. Travellers of Irish heritage and Gypsy/Roma boys tend to leave school earlier than girls from these communities. Roma boys with EAL, on the other hand, are more likely to reach Year 11 than their female counterparts.

Based on analysis of a single cohort of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, almost 80 per cent of them transferred from primary to secondary school³. The period of transition between Year 6 and Year 7 is the most vulnerable time in terms of retention – around one in five Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils left the school system at this point in their education.

'Soft' outcomes

Although difficult to define, soft outcomes were said to encompass a range of desired states or results that could be achieved for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils whilst at school. Some interviewees spoke in terms of Every Child Matters (ECM) outcomes such as enjoyment and health and well-being. Other softer, affective outcomes include attitude, motivation and engagement.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils were said to face a range of social, cultural, economic and systemic barriers to maximising their experience of school and education. Interviewees highlighted the need to

² Gypsy/Roma pupils include Romany Gypsies, English Gypsies, Welsh Gypsies/Kaale, Scottish Gypsies/Travellers

³ This figure is based on tracing one cohort of 1,389 pupils who were in Year 6 in 2003 and identified themselves as Gypsy, Roma or Traveller at any time between Years 6 and 11. The analysis does not include all possible forms of alternative provision.

pursue softer outcomes as an essential basis for generating success in the more quantifiable outcomes, especially attendance and attainment.

Concluding comments

This study confirms that whilst focused efforts and targeted interventions aimed at improving low educational outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils are beginning to make an impact, as a group, these pupils remain amongst the most vulnerable (a term used in this report to refer to academic underachievement) in the education system.

The national data collected as part of this research is the most comprehensive and illuminating to date, tracking an entire cohort of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils over a five-year period.

This report has identified six common conditions or principles which appear to be instrumental in raising pupil outcomes (safety and trust; respect; access and inclusion; flexibility; high expectations; and partnership). Collectively, these conditions can impact positively on all identified outcomes. The research suggests that each of the conditions is important but it is their cumulative effect that is necessary for educational outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils to be improved. The key to improving outcomes therefore, may lie in achieving an appropriate balance between these constructive conditions. The unique context of each school has also been shown to enhance or impede the improvement of educational outcomes for these groups of pupils and although generic guidance is helpful, one size does not fit all.

What is clear from all the responses is that change is achieved through a gradual process that responds to identified needs and challenges: there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between inputs and outcomes. The research found that there are complex, inter-related reasons why the outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils fall significantly below those for other children, and that schools are employing a range of strategies in response.

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Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at www.education.gov.uk/research
Further information about this research can be obtained from Laura Edwards,
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This research was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.