

Report to the Advertising Standards Authority

“Bigger Fatter Gypsier”

Brian Foster

Professional Background

I am an Education Consultant, specialising in inclusion issues relating to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in the UK and Europe. I chair the Advisory Council for the Education of Romanies and other Travellers. I contributed to a major piece of research “Improving Outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Pupils¹” and, with Anne Walker, wrote “Mainstreaming Traveller Education: the Litmus test” as well as other articles and chapters. I have coordinated the work of a number of Traveller Education Support Services in London.

I am also trustee of the Irish Traveller Movement in Britain. I am aware of the ITMB’s complaint to the Advertising Standards Authority and its basis, but I have had no involvement in that complaint as this matter has been dealt with by the ITMB’s Director, Yvonne MacNamara.

Traveller, Romany and Gypsy Education

As stated above, one of my roles is in the co-ordination of Traveller Education Support Services in London. TESS are small teams of teachers, teaching assistants and welfare officers who attempt to address the educational disadvantage of Gypsy, Roma and Travellers by encouraging families to become active participants in their children’s education and building the capacities of schools to help them achieve their full potential.

Much progress has made over the years, but there is still a long way to go. The NFER research identified six key areas of practice, all of which needed to be in place if Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils were to make progress. They are:

- Safety and trust
- Mutual respect
- Partnership working
- High Expectations
- Flexibility
- Access and inclusion strategies.

Schools recognise that relationships of trust established with parents together with ‘whole school’ policies encouraging safety and mutual respect, are the foundations of successful educational engagement.

The “Improving Outcomes” research found that 20% of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller² pupils failed to transfer from primary school to secondary school and also that 50% of Traveller and Gypsy children dropped out of school over the course of secondary education.

¹ Wilkin, A. et al, *Improving the Outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Pupils: Final Report*, Department for Education, 2010

² Pupils ascribing to the DFE ethnic categories Gypsy/Roma or Traveller of Irish Heritage.

Racial abuse of Traveller, Roma and Gypsy Children

Children from these communities drop out of school for a variety of reasons, but racist bullying, fear of bullying and the failure of schools to deal effectively with it, are frequently cited reasons by community members. Ureche and Franks³ found almost 90% of their sample of young people from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller background have suffered racial abuse and nearly two thirds had also been bullied or physically attacked.

Derrington⁴ found that Traveller and Gypsy pupils adopted “maladaptive strategies” to deal with or respond to racial abuse or attacks, including “fight” (physical retaliation often leading to exclusion), “flight” (absence and drop-out from school) or “playing white” (denying their culture and identity).

Only those Traveller and Gypsy pupils who were well integrated with their peer group and were prepared to reinterpret negative events in a more positive way, were likely to remain engaged in education and achieve positive outcomes.

Big Fat Gypsy Weddings – Effect on Traveller and Gypsy Children

Evidence drawn from practitioners across the country presents a consistent picture that the Big, Fat, Gypsy Wedding programmes have significantly contributed to racist bullying and abuse of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in schools, affecting attendance, phase transfer and social cohesion. Several practitioners noted problems in schools which had previously experienced none.

The following comments, from Traveller Education Support Services staff indicate recurring themes.

“... there has been a distinct increase in bullying/negative stereotyping since this programme, particularly in secondary schools, resulting in Traveller children feeling much more defensive, ‘sticking together’ and then being perceived as a ‘gang’.”

“ A year 6 girl arriving onto one of our sites who had been called ‘fat’ by other children, not on the basis of size but as a nickname from the programme. Until this [event] mum has been considering secondary school”

TESS Staff have reported general questioning based on themes developed in BFGW which is not inherently racist but forces Traveller children to defend apparent aspects of their culture to which their family do not ascribe. Most parents emphasise that they hold the

³ Ureche, H. and Franks, M., *This is Who We Are: A study of the views and identities of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller young people in England*, The Children’s Society, 2007

⁴ Derrington, C., “Fight, Flight and Playing White: An Examination of Coping Strategies Adopted by Gypsy Traveller Adolescents in English Secondary Schools”, *International Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 46(6), pp. 357-367.

programme to blame because children *'that are not like that'* have been asking these questions.

The practice of “Grabbing”⁵, which was portrayed as part of the culture in the Big Fat Gypsy Wedding programmes, but not recognised by the communities, has caused problems on playgrounds both primary and secondary.

There have been reports of sexual harassment of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller girls in schools, by non Traveller children who mimic the “grabbing” behaviour portrayed in the documentaries, leading to scuffles as well as verbal taunting and inappropriate questioning.

Many practitioners felt that the programme undermined work done over a period of years to develop mutual respect and understanding, and promote community cohesion:

Staff in schools are now having to take on and challenge the myths about Travellers and Gypsies once again, just at a time when significant headway had been made through National Strategies work with schools, this does affect the pupils because of the way in which they are perceived by the adults in school.”

By purporting to be a documentary rather than a reality show involving extensive editing to create an audience attracting narrative, the programme promoted a notion that it was uncovering a previously hidden culture. Feedback from practitioners suggests widespread anger from parents about the way the programmes depicted their communities. The following extended quote indicates the widespread negative impact of the programmes in a rural county.

“The programme certainly had a negative impact for many Gypsy, Romany and Traveller pupils in Shropshire. I had a lot of complaints from parents throughout the county about the programme when I visited them and they generally felt that it was not positive/true to life. They were very angry about how it misrepresented them. I had many comments from primary and secondary schools about Gypsy, Romany and Traveller children (and indeed from the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller children themselves) being called names and asked questions about ‘grabbing’ etc... by non-GRT children. Thus we had more reports of racist incidents than usual from schools. I also had more requests than normal from schools to go in to do assemblies/workshops to inform pupils of ‘real’ Traveller lifestyle and Culture in a positive way... This, I hope, redressed the balance a little!

“Two schools in particular were affected, 1 a primary school, the other a secondary school. Both schools had approximately 14 Gypsy, Romany and Traveller children on the roll at the time of the programme first being shown. (Larger numbers than in most of our schools)

The primary school had a lot of children asking questions of the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller children about their culture and this resulted in the Gypsy, Romany and

5 Boys routinely engaging in physical assault of young Traveller women as part of their courtship

Traveller children 'ganging together' for the first time ever.... We had fights in the playground and a lot of unrest in the village.... Some of the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller Year 6 boys were particularly upset by it all as it adversely affected their friendships with non-Traveller boys. I worked closely with staff and the GRT parents/children to calm things down but it was extremely unpleasant and difficult for several weeks. There had never previously been any problems re: prejudice/discrimination in that school/village- all comments towards the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller were based entirely on the Big Fat Gypsy Wedding programme”

“The secondary schools’ issues were mainly in corridors and on the bus where non-Travellers were ‘grabbing’ the Traveller girls to the distress of those girls and their brothers/cousins.... Not good for ‘inclusive’ relationships... Again, this school usually has very few issues where Gypsy, Romany and Traveller pupils are concerned and staff were extremely relieved when the first series ended and very upset when the second one began! They dreaded the days after the programme had been shown as they knew to expect some ‘nonsense’ related to it... Staff and I worked together to ‘contain’ things but just wanted the programme to ‘stop’!!!

Most of the above evidence relates to the Big Fat Gypsy programmes in general. However, it is clear that Channel 4’s advertising campaign, including the bill board campaign, has played its part, and to some extent exaggerated the effect of the programmes.

While the programmes were widely watched, there remains a degree of choice within families as to whether to view them. The size of the billboards and their ubiquity, however, means that the stereotypical images and messages impact on an even greater section of the population. The choices of image emphasise the stereotypical messages of the programmes; it isn’t difficult to persuade a young child to make an angry face to camera, but to choose that image sends the message, “Aggression is part of this culture, inculcated from an early age.”

The criticism made by the Traveller communities, that the programmes were edited to exaggerate cultural homogeneity within “Gypsy” cultures, while downplaying diversity and common ground with settled communities, is reinforced by the advertising campaign. The selection of individual, sensational images, with no explanation apart from an ethnic label, larger than life and in your face, emphasises the already stereotypical content of the programmes.

One of the greatest challenges faced by schools is dealing with bullying outside the school premises, such as on the journey too and from school, frequently on public transport. The adverts generate regular opportunities for pupils to comment either to their peers from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities or, as a general form of abuse, to suggest that their schoolmates are in some way like Gypsies. By so doing they contribute to a climate of racism.

Conclusion

Based on the wealth of evidence that has been presented to me by teachers and schools from around the UK, there is no question in my mind that the Big Fat Gypsy series and the recent national advertising campaign (Bigger Fatter Gypsier) has caused real, measurable and long term harm to the educational and social inclusion of Gypsy, Romany and Traveller children. That harm is on a number of levels, including physical and sexual assault, racist abuse and bullying, misinformation and hostile questioning, resulting in damage to the self esteem of children, and withdrawal from school. The work of schools and TESSs over several years, to create inclusive schools, based on understanding and mutual respect, in which all children can reach their full potential, has been undermined.

It is not clear at this time how long term the damage and harm that has been done by these programmes and these posters has been, however, the harm and damage is real and will have lasting consequences.

Brian Foster

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