

## Introduction

The Advisory Council for the Education of Romanies and other Travellers was established in 1973 with Lady Bridget Plowden as its first Patron. Lady Plowden became aware of the educational needs of Gypsy and Traveller children in the course of compiling her landmark report *Children and their Primary Schools* (1967). The report recognised that committed teams of professionals would be needed to successfully “arrest the cycle” of educational disadvantage experienced by “probably the most severely deprived children in the country”.

ACERT is a small charity made up of such professionals, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community members and academics; in recent years an increasing number of these professionals and academics have come from community backgrounds and we believe that they have a key role to play addressing the educational challenges faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.

## The educational challenges faced by children and young people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds, including those in fixed housing

### Engaging families with pre-school children

The committee’s Call for Evidence the Chair of the Education Committee states that “... children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds are at the bottom of the attainment table compared with all other groups right through their educational journey.” It is appropriate that the pilot programmes should target pre-school children because those who fail to achieve a good standard in the Foundation Stage will find it difficult to achieve expected levels at all subsequent Key Stages. Because many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents were themselves educationally disadvantaged they may not have the skills, knowledge or confidence to adequately prepare their children for school.

Engaging families has been identified as a key strategy for improving outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils and partnership working between schools and community organisations is critical. Schools with a history of working constructively with settled groups of families have the knowledge and experience to open a dialogue with families whose children are about to embark on their educational journeys; but families who are isolated or highly mobile and schools without the experience will require additional support to establish and underpin the necessary relationships of trust. Educated community members have successfully taken on this role in many areas; ACERT provides opportunities for them to meet with other professionals and share good practice.

Projects should aim to build bridges between families and Early Years settings, sharing their respective understandings of needs and priorities, and build the skills of educated community members to encourage them to become Pre-school or Early Years Professionals. Targeted work with groups of children, while beneficial to those individuals will only be sustainable if follow-up funding is available. Investment in this phase of education would minimise the need for later interventions and contribute to better outcomes throughout children’s education and on into employment.

### Transitioning from primary to secondary school

Transition between phases is a key strategy for retaining children in education. Primary schools can be expected to support parents in applying for secondary school but most secondary schools are not proactive if prospective students do not enrol. In the few areas where Traveller Education Support still exists, such cases will be followed-up, but in too many local authority areas children fall through the net.

Transition doesn't only occur between Primary and Secondary phases. Enrolment in a nursery class does not guarantee a place in the Primary School of which it is part. Nurseries and pre-schools are not always linked to schools so transition needs to be organised.

The majority of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families in fixed housing live in social accommodation or privately rented accommodation and we find that such families may move home more frequently than those living in caravans on well-managed authorised sites. Families who are homeless (and there will be more of them if the Police and Crime Bill becomes law) may go through a sequence of temporary accommodation in different areas, preventing them accessing schools or disrupting their educational experience. Such families may require school places for more than one child, ideally in the same school, requiring on-line applications, interviews, school uniforms and more. Families will differ in their financial and social circumstances, their on-line connectivity and literacy, and their knowledge of services and support in the areas to which they have moved. All too often the difficulties of negotiating the system will prove too much and children will miss out on education.

Often the stereotype that Gypsies and Travellers are always on the move is used to explain why children become lost to the system. Some families do still travel in the summer months while Fairground and Circus families may travel throughout the year. Families living in trailers without authorised sites and those living on boats without residential moorings will be vulnerable to eviction which will disrupt their children's education. The system a Fair Allocation of School Places, which we generally welcome, nevertheless prevents informal arrangements, between families and sympathetic headteachers, to admit known families for short periods of time.

Where Traveller Education Support Services continue to operate, families can receive support in the area they move to, to access schools quickly and maintain educational continuity. The Showman's Guild identifies regional Education Officers who will assist families to liaise with local authorities they visit to identify school places. In practice, however, education and a nomadic way of living have become virtually incompatible.

Transition is important, but in our view there needs to be a national support network, to which families can turn, to help maintain continuity of education. Educated community members could have a key role in outreaching to families, making them aware of their rights and responsibilities, facilitating access and promoting inclusion and achievement in schools.

### Reducing drop-out rates

The Ofsted thematic review *Provision and Support for Traveller Pupils* (Ofsted 2003) estimated that the Traveller school population of England was between 70 and 80,000 of whom 87% were in school at KS2 and 47% at KS4; based on these figures, the review estimated that 12,000 Traveller children were not engaged with education, most of them in the secondary phase. The Department for Education's own research found "Just over half the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in the national cohort were successfully retained in school until Year 11" (Wilkin et al. 2010). Information on numbers of pupils dropping-out of education is not available in the published data but, judging from the relative size of the Primary and Secondary Gypsy Roma and Traveller of Irish Heritage cohorts, it is clear the issue persists.

ACERT and other organisations hear of cases where families have been encouraged by schools to withdraw their children from school and elect to Home Educate, even though they do not have the skills or resources to do so. The Children's Commissioner and Ofsted Chief Inspector have drawn attention to the practice of school head teachers off-rolling low-achieving and SEND pupils to "game the system" and improve attainment data. (Long and Danechi 2021).

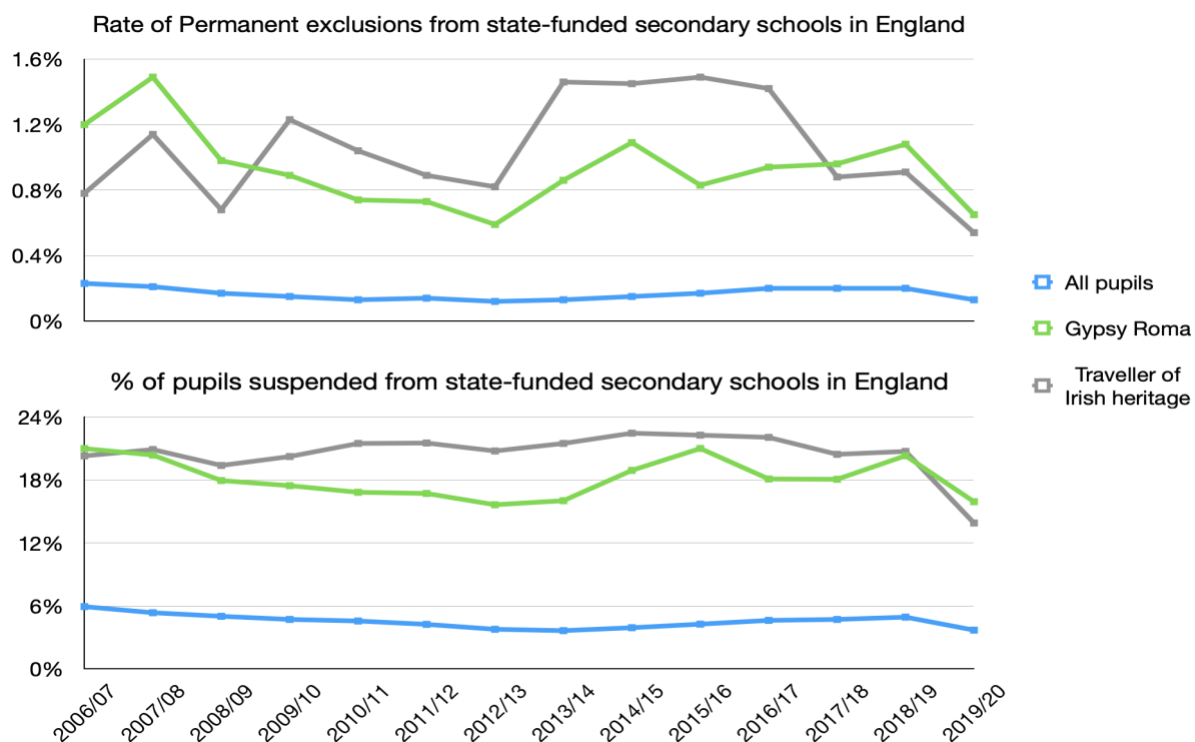
ACERT submitted evidence to the Governments Consultation on Elective Home Education in 2018 arguing for local authorities to have a responsibility to monitor and support home learning families, providing opportunities for hybrid learning and reintegration. ACERT made

submissions to the Badman inquiry (2009) and generally supported its conclusions which were incorporated into the 2010 Education Bill but never became law. Many home-educated children have Special Education Needs and their inability to access appropriate specialist support compromises the rights and their safety.

A major review of the literature on Gypsy and Traveller inequalities, commissioned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, (Cemlyn et al. 2009) found “racist harassment and bullying is the most prominent theme in all the studies, combined with the inadequacy of many schools' responses.” (p.97). A study of families who had opted to home educate their children found “most of the families interviewed felt compelled to take up home education because of problems in school, particularly at secondary level. Seven families talked of overt bullying by school staff or students.” (D'Arcy 2014) More than half of 42 young Irish Travellers interviewed in London gave bullying as a reason for dropping out of school.(Traveller Movement 2020). All Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities put high priority on keeping their children’s well-being and need to be able to trust schools to keep them safe (Wilkin et al. 2010); where parents cannot rely on this, they are likely to withdraw them.

Derrington (Derrington 2007) suggests that the options for many children are “fight, flight or play white” none of which are conducive to full educational participation and engagement. Fighting back is frequently a response to sustained racial bullying and abuse but it can result in school exclusion.

Statutory guidance for those with legal responsibilities in relation to exclusion (DfE, 2017) (DfE 2017) acknowledges this. “Whilst an exclusion may still be an appropriate sanction, the head teacher should take account of any contributing factors that are identified after an incident of poor behaviour has occurred. For example, where it comes to light that the pupil has suffered bereavement, has mental health issues or has been subject to bullying.” (p.10) Nevertheless, exclusion rates of remain alarmingly high.



<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/>

Racism, bullying, exclusion and drop-out are systemic issues which need to be tackled within the context of whole-school behaviour policies, supported by staff training and consistent implementation. Targeting these issues is critically important but we remain concerned that time-limited pilot-projects will not be adequate to address them.

#### Targeting young people not in education, employment or training

Gypsy Roma and Traveller are not monitored as a separate group in the NEET statistics although there is every reason to infer that they are over-represented. Census data shows 47% of Gypsy and Irish Traveller respondents were economically active compared to 63% of all respondents. These groups were twice as likely to be in elementary occupations (sales, service and construction) and their children were more likely to be on free school meals. (Great Britain. Office for National 2014).

Pilot projects by the Traveller Movement, and by Traveller Education Services suggest there is real enthusiasm for training and Gypsy Roma and Traveller young people to welcome the opportunity develop skills and achieve qualifications which will allow them to enter the worlds of employment and self-employment. Alternative provision in the later years of secondary education proved appropriate for some young people although there were significant variations in the options available and the quality of the offer from locality to locality. The standardisation of training since the Wolf report has, in fact, reduced the options available to many young people.

The previous section explains why many Gypsy Roma and Traveller children are no longer in education in KS4 and 5 and therefore are unlikely to be offered appropriate training pathways (Smith 2021) and resulting employment opportunities. For those who do remain in school, we are aware of young people who are offered apprenticeships but as an organisation we have no knowledge of how widespread and effective this engagement is.

Pilot projects in this area could be effective because they may well deliver qualifications which could unlock pathways into employment. We would anticipate that local training providers in the pilot programme areas could respond to community needs and provide targeted courses.

#### Fostering better cooperation between councils, schools and families

In his Foreword to guidance to all schools *The Inclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children and Young People* (2008) Lord Andrew Adonis, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools wrote: "Working towards and achieving effective practice in the education of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils is the responsibility of everyone within the education system – the DCSF [now DFE], government offices, local authorities, schools, teachers, governors, Traveller Education Support Services, parents and pupils." ACERT endorses the sentiment but would also add community members and organisations to the list. We are committed to collaborative working and have participated in the Department for Education Gypsy Roma and Traveller Stakeholder group since its inception. We have recently found the process frustrating due to the infrequency of the meetings, turn-over of staff in the Department and lack of clarity about objectives. Most change has been achieved in addressing the disadvantage of Gypsy Roma and Traveller children when there has been a strong lead from government linked to funding, clear implementation strategies and evaluation; that is not the case at present.

Since 2010 when the Pupil Premium was introduced, funding for Traveller Education has been diverted to schools; schools should be expected to address the educational needs of children on their rolls and attending, keep them safe and include them fully in the school community. Where schools have established good practice, it would be valuable to other schools, particularly those with less experience. Most schools with good practice employ community members to support their outreach functions, support transitions, help catch-up and mentor children. In inter-agency settings, the presence of a confident and articulate community member can be a valuable support to a struggling parent and increase the likelihood of a positive outcome. Community

members and organisations have an important role in awareness training and ensure practitioners are aware of their Public Sector Race Equality duty.

Partnership working has been recognised as key to the inclusion and retention of Gypsy Roma and Travellers in education and training. Partnership with families is, in our experience, an absolute prerequisite of any successful educational programme (Great Britain. Department for Children 2009; Wilkin et al. 2009). Primary schools frequently have warm and encouraging relationships with parents. Schools seeking to make newly arrived parents welcome have organised coffee mornings to enable them to understand more about the work of the school in a relaxed and undemanding setting with home language interpreters, often identified by community organisations, who have a key role in facilitating inclusion.

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers experience racism and discrimination, but in some cases decisions and actions of professionals and officials may also be informed by ignorance or stereotypical thinking. There is an ongoing need among all school staff for cultural and anti-racist awareness training; Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are largely invisible or misrepresented in the curriculum and parents and community activists can make an important contribution to highlighting the histories of their communities in the curriculum and through Gypsy Roma and Traveller History Month.

The reverse is also true; the main reason education initiatives fail is because parents are not involved or worse, are engaged inappropriately; too many secondary schools only communicate with parents to complain about their children's behaviour and attendance and are then surprised when their calls go unanswered. Where pupils become disengaged from education community organisations can support families to re-engage in co-operation with Education Welfare and Children Missing Education Professionals.

The decisions and policies of a range of central and local government agencies can however have an impact on the educational opportunities and outcomes for children. The current Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill will, if it becomes law, prevent children of those families without places on authorised sites accessing education and health care. Lisa Smith, the Chair of ACERT, has eloquently explained the impact to the proposed law in an opinion piece in the Independent (2021). It appears that the current Government has more concern about caravans on roadsides than the education of the children trying to live in them.

[Tutoring for catch-up lessons to support pupils whose education has been disrupted by the pandemic](#)

The pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on Gypsy Roma and Traveller families due to a range of factors, including the digital divide, parental educational disadvantage, health concerns in multi-generational families, mistrust of authorities and pre-existing issues in school making return difficult.

Catch-up lessons will be valuable, but there is a limit to what they achieve, particularly where children are operating at a level below their peers. Kings College and the Traveller Movement have been successful in matching potential tutors; it is significant that this project was devised and organised by community members and was rolled out by an organisation generally trusted by the communities.

[Other initiatives and recommendations are needed to support the educational attainment and employment outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children](#)

Educational attainment and employment are the final indicators of the success of an education programme for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers. There are, however, many steps on the road which must be achieved before the problem is solved. The single most effective initiative, in our view, would be the outlawing of racist bullying and abuse of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in schools. It would require fair, firm and consistently applied behaviour policies. Schools need to

create environments where children can be open about who they are and how they live; otherwise, the experience of going to school will be stressful and learning will be difficult. The fact that many parents advise their children to conceal their identity and subscribe to less contentious ethnic identities indicates how deep-seated the problem is.

The employment of community members has had a significant impact on many schools. As teaching assistants, mentors, teachers, musicians, sports trainers and governors they are frequently people with a wide range of skills which can be used to the benefit of the whole school community in a variety of ways. They are role models for the children from their communities but also, we have found, for other children, especially those on the margins. They subvert the ridiculous stereotype promoted by the media and they feed more realistic and nuanced information into the school and local communities. Children confide in them and where issues are identified, they can mediate between the school and the family.

A previous Schools Minister told ACERT that the funding of Traveller Education and the National Strategies had achieved nothing; he was justifying money being transferred to the Pupil Premium. He was correct in that it was difficult to see the impact of an initiative which effectively ran from 2003 to 2008, but statistics are only valuable if they measure the indicators which are first to change. As an organisation we see a number of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (many of whom will not show up in the statistics because they found it expedient to hide their identities) who have remained in, or in some cases re-entered, the education system and achieved first-class degrees and higher qualifications. Some are working as advocates for their own communities while others have responsible roles in other fields, effectively challenging widely-held stereotypes.

ACERT takes the view that, if any significant progress is to be made in addressing the historic educational disadvantages suffered by members of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, a well-planned and resourced education programme would be required. Such a programme could draw on the extensive research and good practice guidance about which there is little disagreement. But the price tag would be far greater than £1m.

The original press release uses the phrase “education programme” in its headline but goes on to describe pilot programmes. While we welcome the identification of £1 million to fund pilot projects, we would respectfully suggest that this is not what is required by a government serious about creating significant and enduring change. There have been pilot projects in the past, but they were not independently evaluated and there were no serious attempts to embed the lessons learned more widely.

Pilot projects are a way of testing out what is possible and what works; however, there is widespread agreement among academics, professionals and community organisations about what needs to be done and how it can be done. What is missing is political will and commitment to make it happen. In terms of overall education spending £1m is a tiny sum, but even that will be wasted unless the mechanism exists to share the good practice more widely.

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