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**WORKING TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION:  
ASPECTS OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR GYPSY TRAVELLER  
PUPILS**

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**Background**

This research, commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment, focused on effective practice in relation to the education of Gypsy Traveller pupils. The project examined in detail six schools, as examples of successful initiatives in mainstream education by schools that aimed to improve attendance and/or raise attainment. The main aim was to identify the key elements of successful schemes and to disseminate them in order to promote more effective teaching and learning. The findings are put in the context of the research literature on the causes of underachievement by Gypsy Traveller children.

**Key findings**

This research demonstrates that low attendance, access to the curriculum and the achievement levels of Gypsy Traveller children can be successfully addressed by schools and Traveller Education Services (TESs).

- The support provided by the TESs to schools with Gypsy Traveller pupils is critical to the development of best practice. TESs can provide Gypsy Traveller communities with information about schools, secure school places for Gypsy Traveller children by supporting admission procedures and help to devise induction schemes for new children. They can also promote and facilitate regular attendance by organising transport arrangements, helping with the provision of uniforms and support during the immediate period after admission. They can also assist parents in their dealings with schools and help ensure that there is continuity in the educational experience. The TESs also provide essential support for schools by providing appropriate curriculum materials and training for teachers.
- Schools have a crucial role to play in promoting access and raising achievement for Gypsy Traveller pupils. It is essential that there are Race Equality and Equal Opportunities policies in place that specifically mention Gypsy Traveller children and their educational needs, in order to establish an inclusive ethos in the school. It is also important that the head teacher and other staff members demonstrate a commitment to these policies and that schools have effective behaviour codes and anti-bullying strategies.
- It is essential that schools employ special support measures for Gypsy Traveller children. This may include pastoral care systems, in particular building strong and trusting relationships with parents. Other support measures which help Gypsy Traveller children may include, study support, mentoring programmes, homework clubs and sanctuary areas. The way schools handle the initial induction process is also of crucial importance to ensure future attendance and achievement of Gypsy Traveller Children.

In-depth case studies were carried out in schools that had been previously identified as having successful initiatives in working with Gypsy Traveller children in mainstream education. There were four primary and two secondary schools. The fieldwork was carried out in the final term of academic year 1998/1999 and the first term of 1999/2000 academic year. Schools identified what they thought was good practice, providing examples of where there had been success. Interviews were carried out with head teachers, class and specialist teachers, TES staff and parents to validate what was effective and what was not. The project aimed to focus on forms of practice that improve attendance and raise achievement. The study includes an analysis of the research literature around Gypsy Traveller education and the causes of underachievement by this group.

## **Findings**

### **Elements of good practice:**

#### **Access**

The development of the trusting relationships with parents is seen as being crucial to ensure that parents have interest and confidence in schools. This important link can be achieved and maintained through the liaison role of the Traveller Education Service. A named or designated person within the school can also ensure that strong relationships are built and maintained with parents and the Gypsy Traveller community. Their role is much wider than teacher, they often assist with other problems parents or children are having. It is more likely that parents will send their child to school on a regular basis if they know that their child will be looked after. Effective links can also be fostered by the provision of adult education services, in responding to the educational needs of the community. It is also essential that the head teacher and other staff create a welcoming ethos in the school and promoting an explicit culture of respect, care and safety.

Supporting the admission process for Gypsy Traveller children is also crucial. It may be necessary for schools to make personal or flexible admission arrangements as some

Gypsy Traveller families may only be visiting the area on a temporary basis, or miss the formalised admission process. The flexibility employed by schools ensures a welcoming ethos. The TES can play a supportive role in this.

The TES can facilitate and promote regular attendance by making transport arrangements for Gypsy Traveller children to take them to and from school, often by taxi. For many parents this is vital. Many schools also help with uniforms via the LEA uniform grants or the specific TES uniform budget; schools may offer help themselves with uniforms or second hand uniforms. It is important to ensure that a uniform is provided if it is a pre-requisite for attendance. Appropriately trained specialist Education Welfare Officers can also enhance access and attendance. Incentives to pupils, for example, book tokens, can promote regular attendance more than 'force' or punishment for non-attendance.

#### **Raising achievement**

It is essential that schools have an Equal Opportunity policy. This demonstrates openly the school's commitment to providing equality of access to all pupils, especially Gypsy Traveller pupils.

Strong leadership was identified as an important quality, as well as the commitment of senior management to an inclusive ethos. This sets the culture of the institution and filters down to all staff. It is essential that the head teacher works with the TES and involves parents in the education of their children.

Schools should promote good behaviour and respectful relations. They should also have official anti-bullying strategies. It is most successful if the strategy aims to help and inform the bully as well as the victim. There should also be explicit anti-racist strategies, which include name calling associated with ethnic background. This reassures parents that if their child does get bullied this will be dealt with effectively.

Special support measures are also useful. Study support can address problems that Gypsy Traveller children may have. It may

also be necessary for some children to have extra support where they demonstrate weaknesses in basic skills. Homework support may be essential as some Gypsy Traveller children may not have a quiet space to work or pens and books to utilise.

The designation of a sanctuary territory enhances the confidence of some pupils in the schools and staff. It offers a place where Gypsy Traveller children can go and feel safe or seek advice about a problem. The way schools handle the initial induction process is crucial to ensure future achievement and attendance. The TES can support this by providing induction material.

It is essential that schools have culturally relevant learning materials, books and equipment for Gypsy Traveller pupils. These may be provided by the TES, although there is a lack of commercially produced materials. It is also crucial to include the Gypsy Traveller cultural background in the curriculum, some schools set up displays to celebrate Gypsy Traveller culture. It is also evident that an inter-cultural curriculum is to the educational benefit to all pupils, as well the inherent benefits of having diversity in schools.

Flexibility of pupil organisation and teaching strategies is essential to secure better participation rates and success. There are differences in lifestyle and culture which mean that schools need to modify the structure of provision in line with individual needs. For example, a part-time or individual timetable may be required.

### **Staff responsibilities and senior management involvement**

It was identified that it is necessary that senior management teams and other staff are positive in addressing the needs of Gypsy Traveller pupils in order to ensure success, raise their levels of achievement and improve attendance. It is essential that the school take collective responsibility and do not rely on an 'expert'. It is also important for teachers to have awareness raising in their INSET and that the school is proactive in its work by challenging negative stereotypes.

### **Traveller Education Service**

The TESs can support individual pupils but their work can also improve schools' provision and quality of learning for all pupils. TES can be instrumental in adding to professional knowledge by providing informative documentation. Their inter-agency work can also be very effective in improving the quality of life for many Gypsy Traveller children.

### **Conclusions**

As nomadic groups, the education of Gypsy Traveller pupils presents the settled population with an important challenge to ensure that differences in life style and culture are not seen in deficit terms. Such attitudes and subsequent deficit policies are associated not only with maintaining the social exclusion of Gypsy Traveller children but also provide an insight into how exclusionary practices and mechanisms operate more generally in our society. This report is therefore important because it provides insights into improving the education of Gypsy Traveller children, which in turn may offer help in relation to other groups of socially excluded children in English schools.

- The support provided by the TESs to schools is crucial to the development of best practice;
- The commitment of the head teacher and staff to the school's Equal Opportunity policy is critical in establishing the inclusive ethos of the school;
- The most effective schools are those that invest significant management resources into the establishment of good relationships with parents and pupils, that is those that listen to parents and pupils;
- The foundations for success in the case study schools rest on an acceptance and respect for Gypsy Traveller communities;
- Best practice is linked to the degree to which schools are willing to be flexible, in order to meet the needs of Gypsy Traveller pupils;

- Successful learning by Gypsy Traveller pupils depends on accurate assessment, appropriate action if gaps in experience and achievement are identified, and high expectations;
- Motivation, confidence and enthusiasm for learning is influenced by the extent to which the curriculum and resources reflect the reality of Gypsy Traveller culture, history and language; and
- Poor attendance can be minimised by the co-operation of the schools, TES and Education Welfare Service.

*Copies of the full report (RR238) – priced £4.95 – are available by writing to DfEE Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.*

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