

## GYPSY TRAVELLERS AND EDUCATION: CHANGING NEEDS AND CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

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*ABSTRACT: This article explores Gypsy Travellers' changing views on their children's education. It highlights the positive means some schools use to encourage greater involvement of Gypsy Traveller parents. It argues that current educational policy needs to be re-developed to incorporate more effective and affirmative responses to interrupted and nomadic learning. It draws heavily on interviews with Gypsy Traveller families in an effort to give 'voice' to an under-represented community.*

*Keywords: Gypsy Traveller, education, schooling, Traveller Education Services, inclusion.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the views of Gypsy Traveller<sup>1</sup> parents' on their children's education and schooling. The genesis of this article was a project<sup>2</sup> funded by the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) that looked at best practice in relation to the schooling of Gypsy Traveller children. The findings from this research were published as *Working Towards Inclusive Education: Aspects of Good Practice for Gypsy Traveller Pupils* (Bhopal *et al.*, 2000). Its main aims were to address issues of low attendance and achievement for Gypsy Traveller pupils in a number of primary and secondary schools. There was particular emphasis on examining some of the contributory factors associated with the poor attendance and underachievement of Gypsy Travellers in schools. By doing so the project aimed to identify transferable 'good practice' in schools that could be used by other schools to tackle these problems.

Much of the research on Gypsy Travellers is dated and with a few notable exceptions (Bhopal *et al.*, 2000; Save The Children, 2001) what research does exist tends to be descriptive rather than

analytical and, more importantly, has not attempted to explore parents' views. The interviews conducted for the DfEE report provided some startling insights into the changing views of Gypsy Traveller parents: views often at odds with many of the stereotypical perceptions of the schools and those responsible for delivering policy on the children's education. It became apparent throughout the interviews that traditional assumptions that Gypsy Traveller communities are at the very least antipathetic if not actually hostile to the education of their children were ill founded. Many of the parents interviewed stressed that changes and growing restrictions on Gypsy Travellers' traditional lifestyles meant they were re-assessing the world their children would have to make a living in. There was a general acceptance of the value the education system could bring to the lives and aspirations of their community's children. In some cases this acceptance went much further and the desire to see children educated to a high level and to use this as a springboard into non-traditional Gypsy Traveller careers was actively being sought. Perhaps less surprisingly the interviews highlighted the marginalisation felt by Gypsy Travellers from the non-traveller communities, in particular from the school and education systems and from those involved in completing research projects on Gypsy Traveller education and the policy work this informed. The research highlighted how traditional stereotypes determined in many instances how official institutions perceived and responded to Gypsy Travellers.

This article will examine the collision of changing parental views with an unchanging establishment. It will highlight some very positive examples of good practice on the part of specialist teaching services, generally the Traveller Education Service (TES), who are working to engage the Gypsy Traveller community with the education system. It will also draw heavily on interviews conducted with Gypsy Traveller families in an effort to give 'voice' to an under-represented community. The article argues that consultation and involvement of parents and children in the educational process can be one of the most effective ways to identify barriers to attendance and achievement in order to achieve equality of opportunity for Gypsy Traveller children. It will also highlight the changing attitudes of the Gypsy Traveller community towards the education system. This has resulted in a 'window of opportunity' in which the standard of education currently being enjoyed by Gypsy Traveller children can be significantly improved. In order to do so current educational policy has to be re-developed to incorporate more effective and affirmative responses to interrupted and nomadic learning.

## 2. GYPSY TRAVELLERS AND EDUCATION

Research on Gypsy Travellers and their relationship to the systems and institutions of education has tended to concentrate on the workings of the school and other official bodies. It tends to shy away from asking parents what they think about their children's schooling or how their experiences of education are shaped by stereotypical perceptions of the Gypsy Traveller lifestyle as expressed by the educational establishment and by society generally.

Bhopal *et al.* (2000) is in some respects unique as the authors adopt a participant observer approach and attempted to get close to the communities by gaining insights into Gypsy Traveller families' thoughts and aspirations regarding the schooling of their children. So little research has been carried out in this area that the research that does exist tends to concentrate on the most pressing problems or issues, specifically: underachievement, racism and bullying and the relationship between Gypsy Travellers and schools.

*a. Underachievement*

Much of the research has detailed the educational underachievement of Gypsy Traveller pupils (Kiddle, 1999; Liegeois, 1987; Swann, 1985). Education is cited as being the most vital instrument in redressing Gypsy Traveller's present marginalisation and social exclusion in society (Liegeois, 1998). However, it has also been demonstrated that Gypsy Travellers are being formally excluded from state schools once enrolled (Lloyd *et al.*, 1999; OFSTED, 1999). Their underachievement in schools has given serious cause for concern based on the quality and relevance of the education they receive (OFSTED, 1999; 2001). The educational opportunities for Gypsy Travellers have also been affected by the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act. This Act removes local authorities from the obligation placed upon them by the 1968 Caravans Act to provide official sites for Gypsy Travellers who maintain a nomadic lifestyle. Subsequently some authorities have ceased to provide such provision and a large number of families have been forced into illegal roadside encampments. Under the provision of this Act the local authorities have been given increased powers to evict those living in such illegal encampments. As a result many Gypsy Travellers are constantly moving to avoid such eviction. This results in irregular school attendance and has a detrimental effect on the education of many Gypsy Travellers.

... attending many different schools for short periods can undermine educational progress ... the situation has been

exacerbated by involuntary movement in consequence of evictions from unauthorised land. (OFSTED, 1999, p. 16)

This indicates the degree of educational disruption that is being caused for Gypsy Traveller children. The lack of adequate site provision for Gypsy Traveller communities and the problems arising from unauthorised camping have emerged as issues of increasing concern for local authorities. In July 2002, the government announced its intention to produce a new overarching 'Travellers Strategy' which would include measures to tackle unauthorised encampments as well as issues of health, education and welfare (Local Government Association, 2002).

The Commission for Racial Equality has also recognised that Gypsy Travellers face public hostility, institutional discrimination and widespread ignorance about their needs in society (Commission for Racial Equality, 2001). More recently Bhopal *et al.* (2000) have indicated that some schools are reluctant to admit Gypsy Traveller pupils due to the perceived detrimental effect they may have on overall school performance and attendance results and consequent slippage in league tables. Such fears are greater towards the nomadic community as they are perceived as having lower rates of participation and achievement than sedentary members of minority cultures and communities.

Another cause of conflict regarding the education of Gypsy Traveller children lies in the issue of funding. There have been five changes in funding of specialist education for Gypsy Traveller children since 1990.<sup>3</sup> The Scottish Parliament (2001) has recognised that existing funding arrangements should be reviewed to support school and pre-school by providing additional resources where Gypsy Travellers access school education.

Much government policy on education fails to take adequate regard of Gypsy Travellers' needs (Bhopal, 2001) and as a result there has been a growing decline in secondary school attendance for Gypsy Travellers. It has been argued that 10,000 of these children are not attending schools (Save the Children, 2001). However, Clark (1998) has suggested that the traditional hostility towards schools from some Gypsy Travellers has shifted with economic changes and, as a result, a growing number of parents are beginning to accept the value of schooling and education. Jordan (2001a) explains how new distance learning programmes and the use of new technology can allow Gypsy Traveller children to maintain their nomadic lifestyle at the same time as enabling them to have an effective education.

*b. Racism and Bullying*

Reports on Gypsy Travellers and education have recognised the extent to which Gypsy Travellers face racism and bullying in the education system, both as a means of exclusion, and as a means of the Gypsy Traveller diaspora being identified as 'alien' and 'other' (Cambridgeshire Travellers Review, 2003; Save The Children, 2001). A common thread that runs through the literature questions whether it is possible to achieve integration in mainstream education whilst preserving cultural identity for Gypsy Traveller groups. Some writers, such as Okley (1997), assert that entry into mainstream education represents assimilation and such participation is and should be resisted by the Gypsy Traveller community. It has been argued that a desire for cultural separation and cultural fears play a crucial role in self-exclusion (Stewart, 1997). Ivatts (1998) has also argued that Gypsy Travellers themselves feel that if they get too close to the non-Traveller society then there is the possibility that their cultural identity will be diluted. This has consequences for school participation, as some parents are less likely to want to send their children to school.

*c. Relationships between Schools and Gypsy Travellers*

Itinerancy is an important factor of the working lives of many Gypsy Traveller families. Some travel only in the summer, others do so all year round. This nomadic aspect of Gypsy Traveller life presents challenges to educationalists and educational systems, which are designed to meet the needs of a settled population.

The difficulties of this divergence between needs and provision are further compounded by Gypsy Traveller expectations of the education system. Recent research has identified the anxieties Gypsy Traveller parents face when sending their children to school include: children being in a potentially hostile environment, bullying and racist name calling, the moral welfare of teenage girls, sex education, drugs, showers and PE with no private changing rooms, health scares, accidents on trips and potential damage to the family network if too many outside options are presented (Cambridgeshire Travellers Review, 2003; Jordan, 2001b; Save The Children, 2001). The literature also emphasises the importance of establishing trusting relationships between Gypsy Traveller parents and the non-Gypsy Traveller community in order to secure access and achievement for Gypsy Traveller children in schools. The initial access to school education, the availability of school places and the distance from a school depend in large part on whether the families have enough

confidence in the schools for them to trust the institutions with the care of their children (Bhopal *et al.*, 2000; OFSTED, 2001).

The Scottish Executive (2001) has also identified the need for more flexible provision in relation to vocational and work based learning which should be considered for older children and young people in consultation with Gypsy Travellers, so that they can learn skills that are useful for them. Alternative approaches to education should be explored where needs are identified in consultation with Gypsy Travellers. These can include research and good practice guidance on how schools engage with parents and welcome them into schools, for example through teacher contact, Parent Teacher Associations and Governing Bodies. The role of the education system in promoting good relations between Gypsy Travellers and settled communities should be acknowledged and supported by all local education authorities.

### 3. PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN'S SCHOOLING

#### *a. Parents Own Education*

Parents' views on formal schooling often reflected their own past experiences of education and whether they felt these had been useful to them as adults. A minority of the parents interviewed had attended both primary and secondary school themselves. Many of their educational experiences were negative and this affected to some degree expectations of their children's experience of the education system. In many families the parents (especially the fathers) had dropped out of school. Despite this they wanted to encourage their children to stay on and get a basic education. They were generally very supportive of their children's education believing it was a means of learning skills necessary for their children's future. However some fathers felt they could not force their children to attend if they did not want to. The absenteeism of children was often for the very same reasons cited by the parents for dropping out of school themselves. The children's reasons for dropping out are therefore stamped with a cultural validity.

#### *b. Educational Achievement*

All of the parents interviewed in the DFEE study felt positive about sending their children to school and the majority wanted their children to complete secondary education. There was a clear recognition that their children had much to gain in the way of skills and

qualifications that would be useful to them in the future to secure employment. This was felt to be an important issue as there was a feeling that much of the work traditionally associated with the Gypsy Traveller lifestyle was 'drying up' and would not exist in the future. Parents did not anticipate their children would remain in the 'family business'. As a result there has been a shift away from a desire to keep children at home replaced by the expectation that children need to acquire an education in order to progress towards a career and long-term future security.

However, these positive descriptions of the need for education were regularly tempered by negative descriptions of the nature of schooling and of the institutions themselves. Some parents were not convinced that school was the best place for their children to be educated and believed that some of the content of the education might be irrelevant to children of Gypsy Travellers. Some parents felt a more 'hands on' approach to education could benefit their children, perhaps based around practical subjects that made a connection to Gypsy Traveller's traditional lifestyle and work. Parents regularly expressed concerns about their children being exposed to perceived immoralities of non-Gypsy Traveller society, in particular the fear that their children would be exposed to sex and drugs.

Mrs Lindsay's<sup>4</sup> children, aged between 13 and 15, were all at secondary school and were encouraged to continue with further education. Although personally comfortable with the education system she spoke of the unease of the wider community:

A lot of Travellers don't want to send their children to school. They think there's drugs and things out there. The parents are scared themselves because they didn't go to school. I'm glad I went to school and I encouraged my children as much as I could. I'm glad my daughter is going to school. Things are changing now in the Travelling world for the younger ones, maybe they will be going to school.

Another common theme to emerge was what could be described as a 'partial engagement' with the education system of some Gypsy Travellers. A sense that although parts of the curriculum are critical to modern life – generally basic literacy and numeracy – beyond this the education system as a whole has little to offer members of the Gypsy Traveller community. According to Mrs Kennedy:

Some of the things the children learn, they don't need to know about. Reading and writing, that's all they need. Above that, it's not important. Travelling children stick to their own tradition, my

children want to stay with the community. Have you ever known a Gypsy barrister? I haven't. They never get that far and some of them don't need it, they have their own families who can take care of them.

One father felt that education was important for all children, *especially* for Gypsy Traveller children.

I think *all* Travelling children should go to school, they will learn a lot more than staying in one place and not getting out. They need to get an education because the world is changing. They need to know how to read and write, so they can deal with people every day.

Mr Price had very positive views of education and felt it could be used as a stepping-stone to enable Travellers to be respected in society. He would like both his children to stay on at secondary school and achieve a professional career.

I want them to get the best education they can get. It's important for the future that they get a respectful, decent job. It's hard to have your own business and you can't always make much money nowadays. If they get an education, then people will see that they're not stupid and might treat them respectful.

Mrs Smith emphasised that education for Travellers was very important. She has a son who is at primary school and a daughter who is now at college.

I tell my children they have no choice, they have to get an education. What are they going to do when there's no work? They have to go to school. Education is important for all the children, but it's *more important* for us because the Travelling children don't come from families who can read and write.

### *c. Racism and Bullying at School*

Harassment and verbal abuse form much of the daily experience of Gypsy Travellers. Hostility on the part of the local community often interferes with children's school attendance. If parents fear for their children's safety, they will keep their children at home. All Gypsy Travellers interviewed reported their children being called 'gypo' irrespective of their ethnic status or origin (see also Lloyd *et al.*, 1999). Name-calling is consistently mentioned as a key factor in alienating and socially excluding them from school and society (Jordan, 2001b). At the same time as wanting to send their children to school, many of the parents were aware that their children suffered racism, name



calling and bullying when they attended school. They felt this was something that they had to deal with as they were seen as being 'outsiders'.

My children tell me that the other kids call them names. They call them 'dirty, smelly gypos' and that hurts us because we're not dirty or smelly. But this is something we have to put up with, because we're seen as being different. We don't live in the houses and people make judgements about us, which are always bad and negative.

Such bullying and name-calling would deter some parents from sending their children to school.

I think for some of the parents, if they think their children are being called horrible names and being picked on, then they won't send their children to school. But I think that we have to send them to school, because they will not know how to deal with these things if they stay at home. It's also to show people that we aren't the way they think we are.

Mrs Heart echoed this sentiment.

Getting an education is important for everyone, but it's *more important* for us because we're different. We're Gypsies. If we get an education, then people will respect us and not call us names like, 'dirty, stupid gypos'.

The cliché that Gypsy Traveller parents are not interested in sending their children to school can cover the fact that they are often afraid to do so. The children are frequent victims of racial violence on their way to and from school. Some Gypsy Travellers used self-exclusionary tactics to protect their children from racism and name calling; for example, they were less likely to allow their children to attend school trips than other parents. Discontinuity in the school experience and interrupted learning is a crucial factor in underachievement for Gypsy Traveller pupils. This, with the racism and bullying they experience, serves to exclude them further and as a result they remain a marginalised group who are seen as 'other'.

#### 4. POSITIVE ENCOUNTERS I: PARENTS AND THE TRAVELLER EDUCATION SERVICES (TES)

All of the parents who participated in the research said their relationships with the TES were fundamental to how they were viewed by the school. The TES was their link to the school. Many spoke highly of the work the TES teacher did for them and on their behalf. They felt that the TES teacher's role was vital in securing links and

positive relationships with the school, as well as encouraging children to attend school.

One of the mothers, who felt her son was not doing as well as she would like him to, had a very positive relationship with the TES teacher.

If my son has a problem, he would go straight to the Traveller teacher, and the Traveller teacher would then try and sort it out. The Traveller teacher is very good and patient with my son. Sometimes, I don't know what my son would do without him. He has helped my son a lot. And what they [TES] do is a good thing, because we know that there is someone there who will help us when we have a problem and see things from our side and try and understand what we say and what we are thinking.

One father was particularly positive about the same school. One of the reasons he felt the school was positive for his children was because the relationship with the teachers was encouraging, open and friendly.

The school puts time into the kids. The teachers are good, they give me time if I need it and they give the kids time. They try and treat us like they treat the other parents and they are friendly to us when we go there. Because they are friendly to us, it makes us feel that we can go there again and not feel scared of the school.

Mrs Lock, a parent who has a child at secondary school felt the school does a lot to include Traveller children and their culture.

There are some boards with pictures of Travellers, the Traveller teacher has lots of photos and books in her room. The children made a calendar about our life as well. This school does more than any other school. They've always had Travellers here and know us and do what they can to make sure we're included like everyone else is. The Traveller teacher and the head are always eager to find out about us and learn about our ways. So, this makes us feel welcome and that they care.

As a result, parents were able to trust the school.

We trust the teachers and the school. They make sure everything's done so that we are happy. The school always involves you. The Traveller teacher will always get on the phone and tell you what's going on. Being told what's going on and being involved makes a big difference. Then you know they care about you and they care what you think. Their actions show that they care and want to help our children in school.

Another parent did not feel afraid to approach the school at any time.

I don't feel scared to come to the school because the school makes me feel welcome.

The school was approachable and encouraged this parent to attend parents' evenings.

I think the school makes us feel welcome because they want us to go there. The head talks to us and is happy to see us when we turn up. We go as much as we can.

The TES provide the single most important link for ensuring Gypsy Traveller families feel able to engage with the education system and for educational institutions to understand the needs of Gypsy Traveller families. They provide a means of resolving specific problems that may arise with regard to individual children's schooling. Perhaps more importantly they also provide a means of reconciling divergent expectations and perceptions of both Gypsy Travellers and the teaching profession. Where it is possible to resolve these cultural and structural differences it becomes possible to provide an education to Gypsy Traveller children comparable to their peers.

#### 5. POSITIVE ENCOUNTERS 2: RESPONDING TO THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY

For Gypsy Travellers, family based learning is fundamental to the preservation and continuation of the group's social and cultural identity. Children are expected to contribute to the economic needs of the family from an early age. At the same time, loyalties and obligations to the extended family group serve to strengthen cohesion and stability in an otherwise 'alien' and often hostile society (Jordan, 2001a). Involving the wider family in the education process can therefore be a useful means of promoting education from within the established education system but in a manner that reflects the norms of Gypsy Traveller culture.

In one of the primary schools visited, adult literacy classes were offered to Gypsy Traveller parents. In this way very effective links with parents were instigated and these proved important in maintaining positive relationships with the schools. An interesting by-product of this enterprise was that although the classes were originally intended solely for Gypsy Traveller parents, they proved to be very successful with many other parents in the community. Its success in the wider community for reasons that closely mirrored those of the Gypsy Traveller community highlights the real benefits that 'diversity' brings not just to the minority party but to the wider community.

Returning specifically to the Gypsy Traveller families, this work with parents was positive in that those parents who attended were able to experience the difficulties their children faced in the learning environment. All of the parents whose children were at the primary school attended (this was six mothers) believed that their children needed more than the basic skills of reading and writing in order to have a secure future (particularly if they were not going to participate in the family business). Mrs Black spoke positively of the adult literacy classes.

When they first said I should go, I was against it because I think I was ashamed that I couldn't read and write. But when the other mothers started going, it was good. It was a chance to really be able to try and read and write and not feel bad that we can't.

Mrs White felt that it was beneficial not just for her, but also for her children.

When the children knew I was going, they didn't think I would keep it up. But now I know how hard it must be for them to learn and when I do learn I can help them.

The work with parents was important for linking across different phases of the school experience for children as well as securing their involvement and support in their children's cross-phase transfers.

By me going to the school, it means I can become involved and understand the different procedures the children have to go through and it also means that I can learn at the same time. It doesn't matter that I can't do the big things, but if I can read and write it will help me and the children.

Parents' attendance at school meant they were able to meet the teachers their children had daily contact with. The confidence of Gypsy Traveller parents is raised if they know and trust particular members of staff. In these circumstances they are more likely to want to send their children to school on a regular basis, particularly if they know their children will be looked after and protected from discrimination.

Now that I have met some of the teachers, I know they will care and look after the children and the most important thing is that they want the children to learn and want to help them to do that. Because that is what they have done with us.

When families are constantly travelling and changing schools, there is a need to fill in admissions forms on a regular basis. Illiteracy amongst Gypsy Traveller parents meant that in many cases this was

always done by the TES teacher. For these mothers, learning to read and write enabled them to have greater control over the school admissions process.

When we move and the children have to go to a new school, it's always someone else who has to do the paper work and I don't understand it. Now that I am trying to read and write means I can see what they are writing and what it says.

By encouraging greater contact with the school parents are able to better understand the policies and procedures in place at schools; especially the supportive and flexible arrangements some schools may be willing to offer. Parents reported they felt reassured that their children will benefit from the school environment in a positive and fulfilling way. A common aspect of an inclusive approach has to be the commitment to include parents in the education of their children. All efforts have to be taken to ensure that important information (particularly in relation to pupil progress) is shared with all parents, including Gypsy Travellers. In some circumstances these reports have to be read out to the parents. An inclusive education must address the educational needs of parents (as well as pupils) and the community.

When I can read and write I don't have to have someone come to me to read my children's reports because I don't know what's written down. I can do it myself and try and understand it. This school has helped me in this way.

Informal contacts between school and parents opened up useful communication lines. Teachers were able to pass on positive and supportive feedback to parents. By maintaining close relationships with the families the schools were able to promote messages about the need for home-study routines and school expectations. Parents identified the value of these links:

When we know what the school wants from the children and they can help us, then we will try and do what we can. Some of our children don't know the routines about doing homework and may need help with this. If the teachers can tell us what we can do, then we as the parents can try and do this.

Schools have to try to maintain flexibility in identifying the needs of Gypsy Travellers and in providing them with a continuity of education. This is more likely to succeed when parents are actively engaged in the life of the school. There are fundamental differences between Gypsy Traveller lifestyles and those of the 'settled' population, both in terms of social and ethnic status and a nomadic way of life, that

need to be recognised by the school. Gypsy Travellers are traditionally and structurally marginalised within the wider community, their access to education and other public services severely restricted. By taking an innovative approach to their relationship with Gypsy Traveller families (for example by offering adult literacy classes), schools are well-placed to offer services that are both valuable to the Gypsy Traveller community needs and effectively involve parents in the school.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Gypsy Travellers have been and continue to remain marginalised and regarded as 'other' within the settled dominant society. Current policy initiatives including legislation restricting the ability to travel and stop at will for work purposes have exacerbated this situation and contribute to Gypsy Travellers continuing to experience open discrimination and overt racism in their lives. The publication of attendance and performance league tables has resulted in an increased reluctance of some schools to accept Gypsy Traveller children. There is an inevitable tension faced by schools charged with becoming more inclusive when they are faced with educating potential pupils from a nomadic culture.

These tensions are heightened by Gypsy Travellers' own reservations concerning schooling. Although the parents interviewed were adamant about the positive value of schooling, they also made continual reference to perceived dangers and threats in regular school attendance. Some parents wanted their children to engage with the education system to a limited degree only and acquire basic skills of reading and writing. Others, however, wanted their children to pursue their education further with a view to achieving a secure future career outside of the traditional Gypsy Traveller 'family business'.

What became clear from the research is that a shift in Gypsy Traveller attitudes towards education is underway. There is an urgent need for future research to ascertain more detailed information from both parents and their children on why some families decide to send their children to school and others do not, why some children attend and others do not and an understanding of what the significant factors are in attending/non-attending.

The absence of Gypsy Traveller staff in education services contributes to the sense of marginalisation as well as a lack of understanding of cultural preferences of the group. Strong leadership (from the head) and a holistic commitment to achieving equality at all levels is crucial to delivering education to, and to resolving conflicts and tensions faced by the Gypsy Traveller community. All teachers involved in the

education of Gypsy Travellers, not just TES, need special intercultural training to deal with issues of conflict in the classroom.

Consultation and involvement of parents and children is also an effective, and to date underused, way to identify barriers to attendance and achievement and to develop strategies to address them. Particular attention should be paid to the views and needs of families where parents or siblings have not attended school. There are many barriers preventing particular groups of children from accessing their right to education.

Gypsy Travellers are rarely visible in mainstream textbooks and classroom resources. Although some textbooks do include them, they have often not been widely disseminated or used. Examples of good practice include development of curricula (the removal of all derogatory references to Gypsy Travellers from school texts, the inclusion of references to ethnic and other minority groups in a positive and balanced way) and de-segregation and the employment of Gypsy Traveller classroom assistants (to ensure high visibility of role models). Such good practice can be used to promote equality of opportunity for a group who are otherwise seen as failures in the education system.

Schools need to offer a 'hands on' approach in the classroom with an emphasis on issues and subjects that are relevant to the needs of everyday life. In the case of Gypsy Travellers these need to reflect and value the differences of nomadic lifestyle and culture. Where such provision does exist it has been criticised for being low in quality and value and for failing to reflect the economic needs and aspirations of the Gypsy Traveller community (Save The Children, 2001). It would be useful for educators to discover which skills the Gypsy Traveller community values and how these can be incorporated into the curriculum.

Developing innovative practice to meet the needs of children and young people whose nomadic lifestyles present practical and cultural challenges to educators is complex. Addressing the educational disadvantages of Gypsy Traveller children is a matter of particular urgency to ensure that a growing number of Gypsy Traveller children can enjoy equality of opportunity. This is a complex issue but also demands that policy makers be aware of the diversity that exists within the Gypsy Traveller diaspora. The way that Gypsy Travellers are viewed by educational policy makers shapes how policy towards them is formed and implemented. The current lack of success of Gypsy Travellers within mainstream education systems reflects a history of governments failing to adopt appropriate and effective policies (e.g. policies on funding and good practice). There is a lack of understanding towards the history and cultures of Gypsy Travellers, which contributes to their marginalisation, and racism they experience.

Often educational policies are derived without consultation from the Gypsy Traveller community.

A major question for educational policy makers is whether current educational policy can be developed to incorporate traditional Gypsy Traveller mechanisms, which remove the threat that formal education represents for this group. The one area of common weakness on the side of policy is the lack of pedagogical development for interrupted and nomadic learning. As the nomadic economic community becomes less financially secure, Gypsy Travellers would like their children to gain educational qualifications as a means to alternative employment as well as means to communicate effectively with official bodies.

Educational policy has to recognise the importance of developing a specific policy for the inclusion and success of Gypsy Traveller pupils in schools. In the light of the anxiety with which some Gypsy Traveller parents and pupils may view the school, the establishment and continuity of trusting relationships is important, and broad responsibility must be taken amongst the school staff to foster positive relationships with parents and the community. It is important that the schools take ownership of the relationship with the community and do not rely on a third party to act as 'go-between'. Responsive learning must be part of the culture of the whole school. Schools have to develop policies that are designed to be effective in reassuring parents that their children are safe and protected in the school environment. Furthermore, schools must guard against the development of racist and stereotypical impressions that can undermine the expectations of Gypsy Traveller pupils. Involving the parents and community can help foster positive relationships to secure the educational experiences for Gypsy Travellers.

The desire of Gypsy Travellers to secure an education for their children, often based on a realistic appraisal of future career options, needs to be addressed. Gypsy Travellers, like all members of our communities, have an equal right to the provision of an education, which at the present moment is not being delivered in full. This is a pity as there is a clear window of opportunity for Gypsy Travellers, schools and policy makers to engage with each other on areas of newly emergent common ground. If this does not happen then new, harder and more complex challenges will need to be faced in the future.

## 7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the DfEE who provided funding to carry out the research. The views expressed in this article are the views of the author and not the department. I would like to express my thanks to



all the schools, TEs and families who participated in the research and gave generously of their time. I would also like to thank Martin Myers who read earlier drafts of this article.

## 8. NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Recently, the terms used to describe those from nomadic or semi-nomadic communities have become problematic and controversial. The generic term 'Travellers' has become acceptable and the preferred terminology to describe a number of distinct communities who either are, or have been, traditionally associated with a nomadic way of life. These communities can include Gypsies/Romanies of English, Scottish or Welsh heritage; Gypsies and Travellers of Irish heritage; Roma/Gypsies mainly from Eastern and Central Europe; Fairground families or Showpeople; Circus families/groups; New Travellers and Bargees. The use of some of the specific and traditional definitions of the different communities is being insisted upon by members of the communities themselves. For this reason, the use of the generic term 'Travellers' is unhelpful as it uses families to distinguish the main target group. As the majority of children and parents who participated in the research were from Gypsy backgrounds (some were of Irish Gypsy or Traveller heritage), the term 'Gypsy Traveller' is used.
- <sup>2</sup> The research was conducted in six schools, four primary and two secondary. Schools were selected from a range of geographical areas, both urban and rural, but all known to have relatively large Traveller in-takes. A total of 20 families participated in the research. Eighteen mothers and two fathers (from 20 of the families) were interviewed. All of the parents had at least one child from one of the six schools that participated in the wider research. Sixteen (out of 20) of the parents lived in trailers (caravans) on established sites. All had regularly travelled in the past and most still did so. Three parents had recently moved into houses, a further parent was waiting to be housed by the local council.
- <sup>3</sup> The Education (Grants) (Travellers and Displaced Persons) Regulations 1990, established under Section 210 of the 1988 Education Reform Act, empowered the Secretary of State to pay a grant to Local Education Authorities in support of expenditure to promote and facilitate the education of Travellers irrespective of age. The Section 488 of the Education Act 1996 replaced Section 210 forming the Section 488 Specific Grant for Traveller Education. From April 2000 the grant was merged with the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant to form the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Grant (EMTAG) falling within the Department's Standards Fund. From April 2001 the grant was de-merged from EMTAG to become the Traveller Achievement Grant (TAG) but was still part of the Standards Fund. From April 2003 the TAG, along with other smaller grants, was merged together, and along with additional funding, to form the Vulnerable Children's Grant (VGC). The VGC allows Local Education Authorities to allocate funding based on local needs and to provide coherent support across a range of vulnerable children, including those from Gypsy Traveller backgrounds (Minority Cohesion Team, 2003).
- <sup>4</sup> All names of respondents are pseudonyms.

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