



# A Good Practice Guide

for improving outcomes for  
Gypsy, Roma and Traveller  
Children in education

April 2019

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# Foreword



This important research report on the education of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) children, provides a timely insight into an area of education that has regrettably slipped from vision in the last decade and its pages reveal stark evidence of what must be of growing concern to a society committed to one 'that works for everyone and of fairness and opportunity'. It is timely also, in that it puts yet more flesh on the bones of the deeply worrying report from the Women and Equalities Committee, which tells of GRT communities in the United Kingdom being 'comprehensively failed by policy makers'.

This report rightly reminds us, and hopefully government too, that the elements of best practice are well known, developed over years and proven to be highly effective in meeting the specific educational needs of GRT children, parents and communities.

This achievement has been the result of generous public investment, dedicated professional and civil society action and informed and wise political will. The recommendations of this report clearly encourage, primarily, the government, not to let go of this remarkable national achievement.

Enforcing good practice is clearly the responsibility of government, local authorities, Academy Trusts and schools, together with, of course, the leadership responsibilities of head teachers and teachers. The report, however, reminds us again that behind the slipped vision, all is not well and the parents of the victims of poor and inappropriate policy, provision and practice, are left to fight their children's own corners with increasingly blunted equality tools for citizen's redress against injustices. The critical work of key civil society players is well illustrated in the seven illuminating case studies and it would seem that their crucial work will sadly be demanded for some time to come.

An encouraging vision of what is still possible in terms of best practice, should be noted from the four best practice schools listed, as too, from the advice and opinions of the quoted specialists in this area of education. Through the pages of this report, one hears the repeated cries for action and for this to be taken urgently and based on proven best practice unhindered by excuses which wilfully ignore past achievements.

Above all, this report must send a clear message to government not to let things slip further and to reinvest and reignite the professional enthusiasm witnessed in the twenty proceeding years to 2008. The relevant ministries now need to understand the root causes of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller exclusion and marginalisation and to design bespoke policies, provision and practice to ensure real inclusion and equality of outcomes in education and life chances. These pleas must come as a wakeup call and hopefully be a justifiable warning to government not to lose sight of this issue given that the societal quod is increasingly confetti-littered with the many audit reports on the destructive consequences of forty years of neo liberalism.

**Arthur Ivatts OBE**



## Acknowledgements

The Traveller Movement wishes to thank the young pupils, parents, head teachers and educational specialists who contributed so generously to this report.

We also wish to thank Arthur Ivatts OBE, The Advisory Council for Education of Romany and other Travellers (ACERT) members Margaret Wood and Peter Norton, TM Trustees Brian Foster and Pauline Anderson and Matthew Brindley (former TM policy manager) for their expert input and critical feedback.

Finally an enormous thanks to Esmée Fairbairn for funding this project.



# Executive Summary

This report outlines good practice in the education of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) school children. It interviews schools, provides case studies, and includes an overview of the findings from Traveller Movement's three year education and advocacy project.

Without a shadow of a doubt much more needs to be done to improve the attainment and educational outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in the UK. As highlighted by Department for Education, GRT pupils have the poorest educational outcomes of all ethnic groups<sup>1</sup>. As this research succinctly demonstrates, improvements to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupil attainment requires **time, flexibility, financial and social investment, and a commitment to equality and inclusion**.

In this research we highlight seven case studies where children and their families were assisted by the advocacy team. The presenting issues include: racist bullying; unmet Special Educational Needs; school exclusion; admissions and transport; discrimination; attendance and; elective home education. Each case evidences a high level of need by families, the complex and bureaucratic nature of school systems, and the level of advocacy required to address each issue.

What was also apparent from analysing the casework was the level of prejudice and discrimination exhibited by schools, many of whom were unaware that GRT are distinct ethnic groups. In Traveller Movement's experience, poor responses to racial harassment and weak anti-bullying policies undermines teachers, diminishes trust in pupils and their parents and prevents children from flourishing at school. Unaddressed racist bullying is also a significant contributor to school exclusion and early school leaving.

We also interviewed schools with high GRT populations and good attainment to ask what they were doing to ensure GRT children reached their full potential.

These schools consistently provided the following:

- An environment of safety and trust;
- They cultivate an ethos of respect;
- They are committed to access and inclusion;
- They provide some flexibility;
- They have high expectations of their pupils; and
- They work in partnership with families, pupils and local communities.

Additionally, the schools communicated openly and respectfully with children and created good working relationships with parents.

Throughout this report we use the acronym **GRT** to mean **Gypsy, Roma and Traveller**. We do not suggest that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are the same, but this acronym is used for the sake of brevity.

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1 <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/dfe-has-long-way-to-go-to-deliver-for-gypsy-roma-and-traveller-pupils-minister-admits/>



# Key Findings

## TMs Advocacy Project

### Findings:

- School admissions, transfers and requests for school transport constitute a significant proportion of TMs casework each year, indicating high levels of digital exclusion;
- Overworked local authorities often lack the resources to assist families to complete online/hard copy applications;
- Schools often refuse to engage with families until online/hard copy applications have been submitted;
- Parents often lack the confidence to engage proactively with schools, often due to their own negative school experiences;
- Discrimination affects the vast majority of families that we assist;
- Schools exclusions are often given as a first rather than a last resort, and are frequently given to children with Special Educational Needs (SEN);
- Most schools lack the resources to support children with SEN;
- Academy schools only respond to the threat of legal action;
- Funding for school uniforms lack of funding for school uniforms causes many families distress and financial hardship;
- Racist bullying is rarely addressed appropriately, and most schools do not realise that GRT are ethnic groups;

## Good Practice Schools

### Findings:

- These schools make extra effort in building relationships and welcoming the parents of the GRT pupils;
- These schools are aware of topics that GRT parents might be sensitive about and willing to discuss those with them;
- These schools accommodate parents with low literacy skills;
- $\frac{3}{4}$  of these schools have had GRT TA's or Interns who act as a link between the school and the families;
- These schools include Gypsy, Roma and Traveller history and culture in their curricula;
- These schools tackle bullying proactively, and GRT children are not disproportionately targeted than any other children in these schools.



# Recommendations

## For government

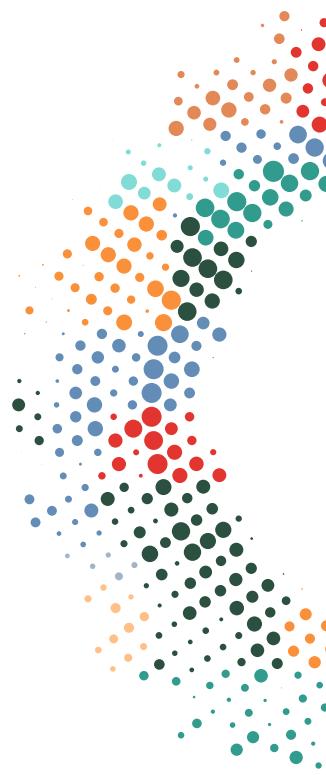
1. Establish an inter-departmental government strategy to promote the social inclusion of Gypsy, Roma and Travellers in education, health and social care;
2. Revisit, update and re-release the materials developed through the National Strategies Gypsy Roma Traveller Achievement Programme, and fund a nationwide training programme to promote them;
3. Earmark funding and a national coordinator to support Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month;
4. Re-introduce ring-fenced and monitored funding to Local Authorities to provide services to support the educational inclusion, engagement, transitions and opportunities of GRT communities;
5. Ensure a module on strategies to promote the inclusion of GRT children and young people is included in all initial teacher training courses (Primary and Secondary);
6. Monitor racist bullying and intervene if it is found to be systemic; send warning letters to schools where bullying is proved to be regular and racist;
7. Monitor the Academy Trusts accused of racist practices;
8. Ask questions of Ofsted and make sure that their inspectors are suitably trained to ask schools the right questions and stop them from getting away with bad practice;
9. Make off-rolling difficult for schools;
10. Ensure a more robust monitoring system for elective home education.

## For schools

1. Employ Gypsy, Roma and Travellers as paid members of school staff;
2. Provide Equality duty training for all staff ensuring they understand GRT ethnicity is a protected characteristic and that discrimination and abuse are offences;
3. Implement a consistent and coherent whole school policy on bullying;
4. Schools should use open, inclusive and transparent language when communicating with families.

## For parents

1. Make use of opportunities to learn about your children's education;
2. Ask questions and seek advice, where it is available;
3. Insist on your child's school celebrating Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month;
4. Tick the Gypsy/Roma or Traveller of Irish Heritage ethnicity box on the school admissions form.



# Introduction

The 2011 Census exposed stark inequalities across a range of social indicators for members of the Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities. In relation to education, the Census found that Gypsies and Irish Travellers are three times more likely to have no qualifications and are significantly more likely to be economically inactive compared to the average population for England and Wales. Further, a report <sup>2</sup> by The Traveller Movement (TM) in 2017, found that 70% of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people had experienced discrimination in every aspect of their education. The research found that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people, at all levels of education, were confronted with ill-informed stereotypes, and in many cases, blatant racism while the Race Disparity Audit <sup>3</sup> confirmed the high rates of exclusions, and the low rate of attainment and outcomes.

The poor outcomes experienced by Gypsy, Traveller and Roma adults are symptomatic of the failure of inclusion strategies, and the marginalisation they experienced as children in school. At the end of key stage 4 only 10.3% of Gypsy and Roma children and 21% of Irish Travellers achieve GSCEs. Many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children's experiences in education are characterised by discrimination, bullying, weak attainment, exclusions and early school leaving. In TM's experience, school exclusions often occur after a sustained period of unaddressed racist bullying <sup>4</sup>. These experiences often lead to poor attendance and early school leaving, which then impacts on the long-term ability of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community members to integrate and thrive, which in turn impacts on health and wellbeing.

This report outlines good practice in relation to GRT children in early years, primary and secondary school education, as reported by families, educationalists and schools. It also presents the findings of a three-year education and advocacy project, funded by Esmée Fairbairn.

In carrying out this research we examined the following:

- What are successful schools doing to encourage participation and cohesion?
- What do GRT parents feel works for them?
- How do schools address racist bullying?
- How can other schools learn from these examples of good practice?
- What should the government be doing to raise the attainment of GRT pupils?

<sup>2</sup> <http://travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/TMreport1J-FINAL.pdf>  
<sup>3</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/686071/Revised\\_RDA\\_report\\_March\\_2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/686071/Revised_RDA_report_March_2018.pdf)  
<sup>4</sup> <http://travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Never-Giving-Up-On-Them.pdf>

# Background and context

*“Working towards and achieving good practice in the education of Gypsy Traveller pupils is the responsibility of everyone within the education system – DfES, LEAs, schools, teachers, governors, the Traveller Education Support Services, parents and pupils<sup>5</sup>. ”*

**Department of Education and Skills, 2003**

In 2003 the Department for Education and Skills issued guidance called Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Gypsy Traveller Pupils – A Guide to Good Practice. It outlined best practice, what schools should be doing, how parents could be supported and how Gypsy and Traveller pupils could raise their attainment. However, times have changed, budgets have been cut and the much-needed bridge between the community and the schools, the Traveller Education Support Services (TESS) have been greatly diminished. The positive steps taken between the years of 2003-2008 have largely been reversed, and Gypsy Roma and Traveller (GRT) children continue to have the lowest levels of educational attainment and outcomes of all ethnic minority groups.

Good practice in GRT education has become an optional add on, rather than a mandatory policy with good schools taking an inclusive approach while other schools follow a rigorous outcomes-focussed academic agenda.

Many of the issues which impact on GRT pupils remaining in school, such as unaddressed racist bullying, low expectations from schools, or poor cultural awareness have had the detrimental effect of pushing GRT pupils from mainstream education and side-lined in favour of pupils who are deemed academically higher achieving.

# Current educational environment

The number of children permanently excluded from school rose by more than a 1,000 between 2016 and 2017<sup>6</sup> with children from Black Caribbean and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities most likely to be excluded<sup>7</sup>. In 2016/17, Traveller of Irish Heritage pupils and Gypsy/Roma pupils had the highest rates of permanent exclusions, at 0.45% and 0.36% respectively<sup>8</sup>.

Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders has stated that cuts in school support and council services means schools increasingly have to fall back on the use of exclusions. Austerity has decimated local authority budgets and the relevant early support services that typically provided much needed early interventions. This has led to a climate of hostility to intervention, with schools and local authorities only responding to the threat of legal action.

Avenues for additional advocacy and support have diminished greatly since 2010. The Traveller Education Support Service (TESS), promoted as an example of ‘good practice’ has mostly been removed from local authorities leaving little in the way of specialist advocacy for GRT communities. See Foster and Norton (2012) for literature<sup>9</sup> regarding the role of TESS.

5 Foreword to Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Gypsy Traveller Pupils, DfES 2003

6 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jul/19/sharp-rise-in-pupil-exclusions-from-english-state-schools>

7 3. Department for Education [DfE] (2018) ‘Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: 2016 to 2017’.

Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england-2016-to-2017>

8 <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/absence-and-exclusions/pupil-exclusions/latest>

9 [https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/ERR8\\_Brian\\_Foster\\_and\\_Peter\\_Norton.pdf](https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/ERR8_Brian_Foster_and_Peter_Norton.pdf)

Last but not least, academisation – and the growth of multi-academy trusts - has become a major barrier to a fair and inclusive educational environment for all pupils. Due to a lack of oversight or accountability more and more academies are engaging in practices not reflected in local authority maintained schools, such as excessive off-rolling and higher numbers of pupils opting for elective home education (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Wider scrutiny regarding their accountability and following due process is urgently required.

As stated by the Department for Education and Skills in 2003, 'working towards and achieving good practice in the education of Gypsy Traveller pupils is the responsibility of everyone within the education system – DfES, LEAs, schools, teachers, governors, the Traveller Education Support Services, parents and pupils<sup>10</sup>.' However, in practice this no longer proves to be the case, with parents and children left outside of decision-making processes, and additional support services are virtually non-existent.

## What the education specialists say

We identified and interviewed four education specialists who between them have decades of experience working with the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Some of these are former TESS teachers, former head teachers at schools with significant GRT pupil ratios, and educational consultants, researchers and GRT advocates.

We asked them about improving parental engagement, attainment issues, Gypsy Roma and Traveller History Month, bullying, and Government responsibility.

### How to engage with parents

The education specialists pointed out that some GRT parents have very limited and often negative school experiences and therefore children's physical and moral safety, and practical skills can be more important to them than academic achievement. **Organising sessions for parents where they can support each other and get tips on how to help with children's homework are a few good examples of how to cross this barrier.**

Education specialists agree that reaching out to involve parents is essential and that schools should have a designated senior member of staff who focuses on parental engagement. **Making parents feel included and welcome is a key and will require time, cultural awareness and commitment.**

Communication with parents should be proactive, if schools only contact parents to complain or deliver negative news, parents will most likely become harder to reach. **Sharing policies to demonstrate that they are fair and applied in the same way to all pupil groups is a good way to involve and reassure parents.**

If parents disagree with parts of the curriculum, uniform rules etc. the school needs to arrange extra time to talk with them and try to find solutions the same way they would do with any parent. **Home visits or special events to familiarise with parents is agreed to be a good way to build trust with parents.**

## How to improve GRT pupil attainment

The first priority should be **to make the school a safe place and a worthwhile experience for the GRT children**. Sometimes differentiating the curriculum, by adding more practical activities, or visual stimuli, can be beneficial and will provide a more applied education.

The education specialists believe that **a personalised approach** is generally necessary when teaching GRT children as most will have life circumstances that can negatively affect their education (e.g. late start, discouraged by parents, bullying, SEN, domestic abuse, evictions, family and caring responsibilities).

Schools should assess each child's abilities from the start and **be more flexible**. For those children who enrol mid-year or who are absent at times for travelling, there needs to be an **appropriate induction process**. Sometimes parents do not realise that keeping a child at home a day or two each week will seriously disrupt their learning. This should be discussed with parents from the start.

Education specialists recommend **employing Travellers on the school staff**, starting from teachers' assistants who can act as role models for the Traveller children and as bridges between the families and the school.

One key area of concern for the education specialists is **transition to secondary education**, there needs to be much more **parental reassurance and involvement**.

## Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month (GRTHM)

The education specialists think that GRTHM has offered Traveller children recognition and status that they might not otherwise have had but they agree that **Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture and history should be celebrated in schools** together with other cultures and not on its own. Most importantly GRT cultural identities should be **included in school curricula** in all UK schools. For example, all school libraries should have good quality fictional and non-fictional books that reflect GRT history, language and culture.

Education specialists suggest that GRT pupils should approach their head teachers and offer to conduct their own assemblies that celebrate their culture, however only if they are safe to do this without the fear of post event bullying.

## How to tackle bullying in schools

School policies on bullying and racism need to spell out explicitly what is unacceptable language and behaviour towards GRT children, as often not even the school staff seem to be aware of these. **Every accusation of racist bullying should be thoroughly investigated and recorded by the school**. Racism should not be tolerated in any form and persistent acts of racism should face a sanction, up to and including school exclusion. **If a school continuously ignores accusations of racist bullying, this should be reported to Ofsted**.

Schools need to have **clear reporting frameworks**, including anonymous reporting boxes for pupils.

Every incident has to be dealt with consistently with **an educative, restorative justice approach** first with well-defined escalation for repeated offences.

Parents of the victims and the perpetrators need to be involved, and parents and pupils need to understand what action has been taken and that it is fair. GRT parents' lack of positive school experiences and lack of trust in the school system can heighten their emotional response to their child being bullied. **Therefore, it is vital that the school takes time to communicate and explain every incident and repercussions to the parents**.

## Government responsibility to GRT children in education

Between 2003 and 2008, when Traveller Education was ‘mainstreamed’, there were coordinated policies involving central government, local authorities, schools, Traveller Education Support service (TESSs) and families. The ending of ring-fenced funding in 2008 followed by local authority cuts, the increased autonomy of schools and the pupil premium, has brought the situation back to where it was some 30 years ago.

**The most important service provided by TESSs, which has not been replaced by another service provider, was their role in maintaining educational continuity, when education broke down or was disrupted due to family circumstances. The Pupil Premium, which the Department of Education suggests meets the needs of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers does not deal with these situations and not all GRT children are eligible for Pupil Premium. Therefore, children are excluded, encouraged to home educate and allowed to drop out, with no-one having responsibility and skill to pick up the pieces.**

## What defines good practice?

So what defines good practice? In 2003 the Department for Education and Skills issued national guidance outlining good practice in GRT education. The joint experience of schools and Traveller Education Support Services in influencing the achievements and outcomes of GRT children led to the development of a series of recommendations. Please see appendix 2.

The National Strategies identified good practice as an inclusive environment, high expectations, firm anti-bullying policies, celebrating culture and heritage, and working with families to ensure they are included in the decisions that affect their children’s futures.

Further, Wilkin et al (2010) established six core principles to improve outcomes of GRT in school. These were: establishing safety and trust, mutual respect, partnership with parents, high expectations, flexibility and support for access and inclusion”. (See Wilkin, A. et al, 2010).

Additionally, the national strategies provided good practice case studies generated from the partnership of TESSs, schools and the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller communities and provided much needed additional guidance in the education of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller school children. However TESS's were largely dismantled from 2010 onwards<sup>11</sup>.

Good practice is largely known – we are not reinventing the wheel – it requires time, investment, and a commitment to equality and inclusion.

However a persistent barrier to children remaining in school is prejudicial attitudes from schools and teachers, and unaddressed racist bullying from pupils.

11 [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2lw1\\_Krq5gnell0TmdtUWcyTFE/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2lw1_Krq5gnell0TmdtUWcyTFE/view)



## Enforcing ‘good practice’?

If schools cannot demonstrate good practice in relation to GRT education, and if they fail to address damaging hateful behaviours such as racist bullying, what options are left for families to challenge unequal treatment?

### The Equality Act (2010)

While public bodies have in the past been held accountable for race equality, including the mandatory reporting of racist incidents (see the Race Relations Amendment Act, 2000), since the introduction of the Equality Act in 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty there is no longer a specific duty to report race-related incidents, or to monitor race equality. Further the Act introduced a general duty – the equality duty – rather than one which is ethnicity specific.

Under section 149 of the Equality Act a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- (a) Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited under this act;
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

In terms of monitoring and reporting racism, schools are no longer legally required to report incidents of racist bullying. **The DfE advises<sup>12</sup> that schools may want to keep records of bullying but others may choose not to. The choice is optional, making it difficult for Ofsted to monitor repeat episodes of racist bullying. Given the lack of accountability, specificity or oversight, the equality duty represents only a vague and insubstantial commitment to equality and is very much at the whim of the school.**

### Access to Legal Help

Access to legal aid in educational matters has diminished considerably since 2012. The latest review of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) suggests that people with protected characteristics are disproportionately affected by legal aid restructuring.

The removal of most education law from the scope of legal aid has had an impact on children. Legal aid is no longer available for cases involving issues such as **school exclusions, admissions, bullying and negligence**. Since LASPO was introduced, the number of children granted legal aid for education cases has fallen by 84 per cent<sup>13</sup>. While legal aid remains in scope in special educational needs (SEN) cases, it is not available for representation at the first-tier tribunal, or for expert attendance at a hearing. This can mean parents of a child with SEN who have claims related, for example, to challenging a local authority's refusal to conduct an education, health and care needs assessment, face an inequality of arms against a local authority who has multiple witnesses and education specialists attending<sup>14</sup>.

While instigating legal action may not seem ideal, it is often the only avenue available to challenge schools that unfairly exclude, discriminate or fail to take action when a child is a victim of persistent racist bullying. However, the legal avenues to challenge schools have narrowed considerably, with legal aid only available for judicial review, SEN and discrimination. This limits the scope for access to justice, with few parents in a position to pay costly legal fees. Given the fact that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are disproportionately affected by school exclusions and bullying, and are often discriminated against in admissions procedures, this is particularly unjust.

12 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/623895/Preventing\\_and\\_tackling\\_bullying\\_advice.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/623895/Preventing_and_tackling_bullying_advice.pdf)

13 Coram Children's Legal Centre (2018), Rights without remedies: legal aid and access to justice for children, available at: [https://www.childrenslegalcentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Rights-without-remedies\\_Final.pdf](https://www.childrenslegalcentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Rights-without-remedies_Final.pdf).

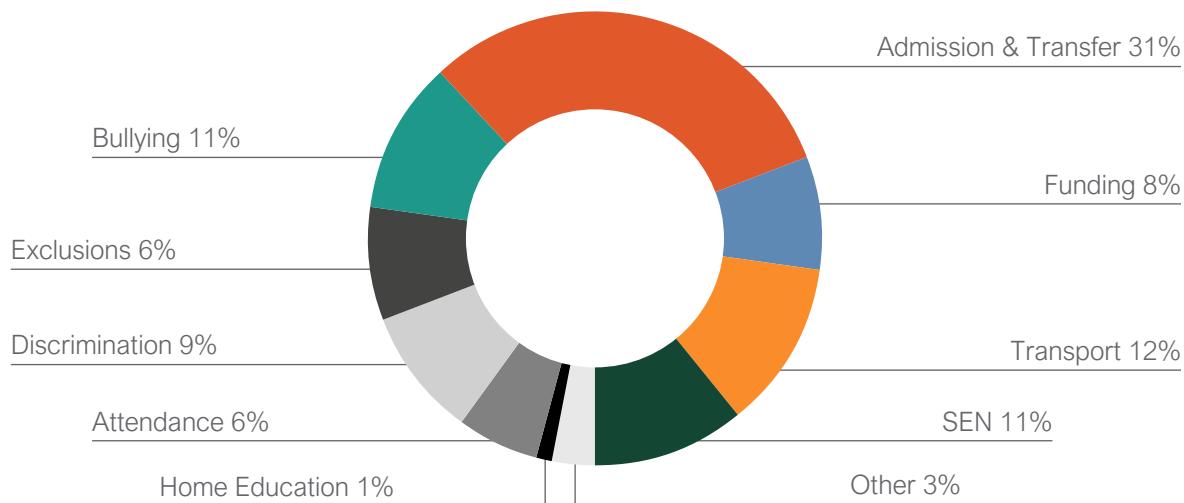
14 <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/consultation-response-on-post-implementation-review-of-part-2-laspo-7-september-2018.pdf>

# Advocacy Project

## Casework

Traveller Movement's Education Project has worked on 160 cases in three years and has assisted Gypsy and Traveller children to stay in school, to get into school, to get better treatment and support in school, and to challenge bullying and discrimination in school. The number of children helped is significantly higher than 160, as one case can include several children from the same family, if their situation or needs were the same, e.g. admission & transfer, attendance, transport, elective home education (EHE) or discrimination/bullying. Table 1 breaks down the type and percentages of cases we worked on.

**Table 1. Traveller Movement Education Project casework**



While some of the cases are quickly resolved, the majority take weeks or even months to make real progress. While initial enquiries might relate to one area of work, families will often return for further assistance of advocacy as issues arise at school. This indicates that there is an overwhelming need for specialist support, far beyond what one NGO can offer.

## Findings:

- School admissions, transfers and requests for school transport constitute a significant proportion of TMs casework each year, indicating high levels of digital exclusion;
- Overworked local authorities often lack the resources to assist families to complete online/hard copy applications;
- Schools often refuse to engage with families until online/hard copy applications have been submitted;
- Parents often lack the confidence to engage proactively with schools, often due to their own negative school experiences;
- Discrimination affects the vast majority of families that we assist;
- School exclusions are often given as a first rather than a last resort, and are frequently given to children with unmet Special Educational Needs (SEN);
- Most schools lack the resources to support children with SEN;
- Academy schools only respond to the threat of legal action;
- Funding for schools uniforms causes many families distress and financial hardship;
- Racist bullying is rarely addressed appropriately, and most schools do not realise that GRT are ethnic groups.

## Case Studies

We have chosen seven case studies to display the type of issues parents contact us about. We hope that these cases demonstrate some of the barriers Gypsy and Traveller parents are faced with in the education system (e.g. bullying, discrimination, illiteracy & digital exclusion). The examples will also shed light on the complexity of the cases and the amount of time required to work on them.

### Case study 1: Exclusion

A Year 7 Irish Traveller boy was permanently excluded from school 6 days into the new school term. The boy's mother contacted TM who helped her to appeal the exclusion to the Independent Review Panel (IRP) and found her an EHRC-funded solicitor.

The exclusion was quashed by the IRP as it was seen as irrational and unlawful, and didn't meet the threshold for permanent exclusion. TM accompanied the mother to the appeal hearing and to multiple meetings with the school.

Her son was reinstated, but spent the next 12 months in the Learning Support Unit, separated from the general student body. Together with a solicitor TM applied for a move to a nearby school, which was, at first, prejudicially denied. Under the threat of legal action, the new school overturned its decision.

The mother changed her mind about moving school, so son stayed at the original school but **six months later** she asked TM to re-apply for the transfer, and the new school again denied the request.

Finally, with some pressure from the Local Authority, TM managed to get the son on the new school's register.

**Note:** both schools in this case study are academies

### Case study 2: Admissions & transport

TM helped to apply for a school place for a Reception Year Irish Traveller girl. No places were available at the three nearest primary schools and she was offered a place in a school eight miles away from home.

The girl had been out of school for a month as the mother wanted her to attend a nearer school with other Traveller children. TM appealed the admission decision and contacted the preferred school. School had vacancies left. TM advised the mother to call the school and arrange for the girl to start.

**A week later** the mother called again, she was having trouble registering her daughter through the school's online system. She needed to create an online account through the council website and then submit request to preferred school. TM called the school and explained, but school confirmed they could not allow girl to start before online registration is done. TM helped the mother to register online and submitted proof of address documents on her behalf.

**A week later** the mother called again asking about school as she hadn't heard anything. TM called the school and was told that the mother needed to check her emails as the confirmation had been emailed to her.

The mother asked for TM's help to apply for school transport. The mother had contacted local council A and was told that it was the neighbouring council B's responsibility to provide transport as they believed family resides there.

TM phoned the local council B and then advised the mother to submit a transport support application to council B. With TM's help the mother submitted the application but was informed a week later that it was council A's responsibility to provide transport support.

Finally, after pressure from TM, council A requested the name and DOB of the girl in order to assess her eligibility for school transport. TM provided information. Council also asked for a completed transport support application and proof of family's low income.

TM sent application form for mother to complete and to send to the council.

### Case study 3: Bullying

The mother of a year 8 Irish Traveller boy contacted TM, as her son had been in and out of school because of bullying and racist name-calling. Once he had been strangled with a school tie. He had frequently retaliated. School had compared being called 'p\*key' with being teased for ginger hair.

Son was vomiting in the mornings and spent most of school days in the medical room for anxiety.

School attendance officer to mother: "I think you're doing the right thing home schooling"- mother had never even mentioned home schooling because she can't read and write.

TM phoned school and informed them that son will be absent until racism is sorted out and school is safe.

TM accompanied the mother to meetings with school, and school stated that all name calling incidents had been recorded as racism but did not have any records to prove it.

The school moved the boy into a new class and designed a part-time timetable that avoids lunchtime as that is when conflicts occur. New timetable would be reviewed and, if the boy is comfortable, increased in the following term. The mother was happy with the outcome.

**One year later** the mother contacted TM again. Her son was still being bullied and was suffering from anxiety. He was still attending school with a part-time timetable. In the latest incident the boy had retaliated and punched another child after they had punched him. The school placed the boy in isolation to 'protect' him.

The mother had meeting with school with TM involved in the background. She decided and school agreed that the boy will continue on a part-time timetable even though TM tried to tell the mother this will affect her son's education.

**One month later** the mother contacted TM again, she had taken her son out of school because of bullying. She was scared for his safety. She was now considering home educating although she couldn't afford home tutoring and was illiterate. She had meetings with teachers with TM's help.

The boy went back to school a week later, the school agreed with the mother to keep him on a part-time timetable to avoid the boys who threatened him.

**Two months later** the mother contacted TM again. Her son had been in and out of school. The boy was now on his final warning and would be excluded next time he was involved in an incident.

On the grounds that the school had for years ignored the safety of the boy and the racism against him, TM contacted a solicitor who agreed to take the case. TM helped the mother to get legal aid.

### Case study 4: Discrimination

A mother contacted TM. The school her two children were attending was discriminating against Travellers by dealing with incidents involving Traveller children differently compared to incidents with other children.

TM wrote a formal complaint on parent's behalf. Following this the school organised a meeting with parents, TM attended THE meeting. The school and parents came to agreement about how things would be dealt with moving forward. Both parties were happy and the school agreed to arrange cultural awareness training for its staff.

Two months later TM phoned the mother for an update. She said the school had changed their attitude and were now much more positive towards her and her children. The mother was happy with the outcome of the meeting and the intervention from TM.



## Case study 5: Elective Home Education

A mother contacted TM to ask for advice after her two daughters were attacked in school by another pupil following months of bullying. The mum was very concerned about their safety and expressed concern about how the school would ensure that the bullying would be stopped.

Their local council's education support worker had suggested that if the mother was unwilling to send her daughters back to the school, elective home education would be the best way forward. This worker had supported mum to write a letter to the school informing them that the girls were to be taken off roll.

When the mother contacted TM it was to ask advice about how she could best access a tutor and resources to allow her daughters to continue with their education. TM explained what Elective Home Education (EHE) means and gave information about accessing tutors and resources. After considering how EHE would affect their education, the family felt that remaining in school would be better for the girls, provided the school could guarantee their safety or that places would be found in another school.

TM wrote a letter to the school requesting that the girls remain on school roll and that the school deal adequately with the attack. The girls returned to the school and attended a meeting with the other party involved in the attack. Following this meeting the two girls are now back in school and mum is assured that they are safe.

## Case study 6: Attendance

A mother called TM for advice as she had received a fine of £1,000 for taking her child out of school for three weeks to visit an ill relative in Ireland. She had heard that there is a special law for Travellers that allows their kids to stay away from school for longer. TM advised that only Travellers who travel for work can have longer than normal absences from school (T-code) and to engage more proactively with the school regarding future absences.

## Case study 7: Special Educational Needs

A mother called TM. Her year 8 son has Special Educational Needs (SEN) and gets only two hours of school per day. The mother would like her son to attend full time but feels the school is trying to get rid of him. The school had told her that her son keeps interrupting other pupils' learning and will never achieve things that other kids will achieve.

The mother asked the school to apply for an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) but hadn't heard anything. TM contacted the school who responded that they had been gradually increasing the boy's hours. TM asked for an immediate meeting between the mother and the school.

The head teacher contacted TM. The school had assisted mum in requesting an EHCP but had a break of communication with the Local Authority and the EHCP was delayed. The school requested a meeting with the mother to start her son on a full-time schedule as soon as they get the appropriate support for him.

The mother contacted TM. She was really happy as the head teacher had had a meeting with her. Her boy was gradually starting full-time and the school is giving more support to him. The boy was really happy too.

**Three months later** the mother contacted TM again. She felt her son is not learning anything at school and is unable to answer even simple questions. TM contacted the school. They told us that EHCP was submitted three months ago, and the boy should be on a full-time schedule and receiving 1:1 throughout the day as part of his High Needs Funding. The school encouraged TM to contact Local Authority about the EHCP as the school hadn't been successful.

TM tried to contact the Local Authority several times. They eventually responded to say that they had agreed to take son to a further assessment and were writing a draft plan for him.

**Three months later** the mother contacted TM. Her son was attending school full time and is getting a lot of support. He was doing well in school and is happy.

# Good Practice Schools

So, what are good schools doing? We identified and interviewed four schools that have successfully integrated their Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students. In these schools the GRT pupils perform on the same level as other students.

## Findings:

- These schools make extra effort in building relationships and welcoming the parents of the GRT pupils;
- These schools are aware of topics that GRT parents might be sensitive about and willing to discuss those with them;
- These schools accommodate parents with low literacy skills;
- $\frac{3}{4}$  of these schools have had GRT TA's or Interns who act as a link between the school and the families;
- These schools include Gypsy, Roma and Traveller history and culture in their curricula;
- These schools tackle bullying proactively, and GRT children are not disproportionately targeted than any other children in these schools.



## St Edmund's Nursery School, Bradford

### 34% of the children at St Edmund's are Roma from Eastern and Central Europe.

The school feels that the key to their success in integrating Roma children is their effort in making the parents feel welcome and valued.

*"This is the main thing I think, because we have very good relationships with the families. I did a home visit with a parent whose kid goes to a primary school. So, the staff from that school came to visit and were asking why didn't the kid come to school? "Aa she wasn't well". As soon as they left and I asked what is the reason really, because I could see the child was well. So, then the parent said that my child didn't have a clean uniform so rather than sending her in the dirty uniform and having social care get involved I rather keep her home." - Roma teacher*



In order to build trust with the parents, the school will do several home visits if needed, always accompanied by someone who speaks Romani. The school also offers to sit down with new parents while their children are in class, to explain the processes and the benefits of getting an education. They provide parents with advice and help in filling in forms and interacting with different public sector actors.



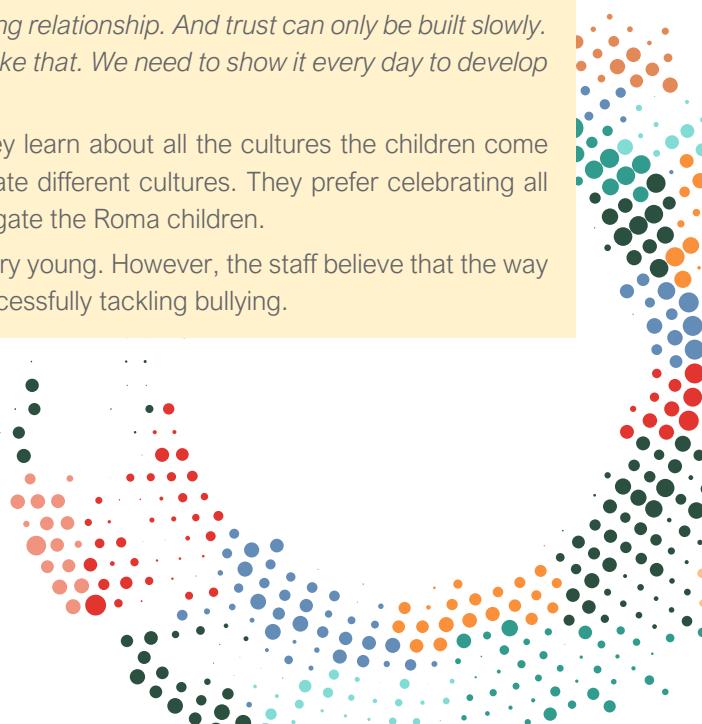
The school employs Roma staff members and provides internships for young Roma, who then act as role models and an important cultural link between the school and the families.

The staff have visited the Czech Republic twice in order to learn about the circumstances some of their Roma families come from. This has increased the staff's awareness of the racism that Roma face in their countries of origin.

*"I think if you just have that open positive relationship, really trusting relationship. And trust can only be built slowly. It's not enough that we tell that we in England don't treat Roma like that. We need to show it every day to develop that trust." - Roma teacher*

The school celebrates yearly 'Our Community Week', where they learn about all the cultures the children come from. They also organise several family events a year to celebrate different cultures. They prefer celebrating all cultures together and feel that **GRTHM** would only further segregate the Roma children.

**Bullying** is less of an issue at St Edmund's as the children are very young. However, the staff believe that the way schools communicate with the parent's plays a major part in successfully tackling bullying.



## Crays Hill Primary School, Essex

### 96% of the students at Crays Hill Primary School are Irish Travellers.

The school organises its days slightly differently to accommodate those children whose families still travel. This is done by teaching lessons in attainment groups, and not in age groups. It has proven to be less stressful for the teachers and for the pupils.

*"When children come to us after period of travelling, no matter how long it is, we very quickly assess them and put them in to the group that suits their reading ability. Nobody comes to any lessons struggling or feeling that they've missed out big chunks of learning."*

Besides grouping children based on their attainment, the school staff are constantly in communication with the parents, updating and informing them on upcoming events, and being open and honest about what is allowed and what is not.

*"I've done some attendance meetings recently, because our families are permitted to travel for business, but they are not permitted to have days off to visit your Nan or whatever. So sometimes that happens, so just have to have honest conversations with the parents and say that we can't authorise that for you."*

Right from the beginning the children are taught to draw a line between school life and home life. They are taught that even if something is acceptable at home, it might not be in school.

*"So sometimes I've had girls complaining that they had to sit next to a boy in assembly, and I'm like that's ok, school is a safe place. We are here, we are adults, we can see you. Sometimes having those conversations, we appreciate that it's not what they do at home but school is a little bit different." – Head teacher*

The school celebrates **GRTHM** by focusing on art and talking about people's similarities and differences. For example, in the past children have talked about what it is like to live in a trailer, a chalet or a house.

The school staff have been trained in and use restorative justice to tackle **bullying**. They get all the children who have been involved in an incident together to talk about it and to decide what consequences there should be.

To engage with families, the school organises numerous different events during the year. To get more parents to attend, they organise informal and formal open classroom days during school hours.

They also organise reading/writing workshops where parents are taught how to help their children to read. If parents struggle with literacy, they are encouraged to get older siblings involved or to find other ways to support reading at home.



## Mount Church of England Primary School, Newark

### 36% of the students at the Mount are English Romany Gypsies or Irish Travellers.

The school has a good and trusting relationship with their local Gypsy and Traveller community, which has been developed over four decades. The staff is knowledgeable about the cultures and about some topics that Traveller parents might need an extra phone call to discuss about.

*"Find out about the culture because in order to establish a really positive relationship with families it's respectful ... And there's certain subjects you wouldn't talk about with Traveller children that we know not to. However, in other schools they might not know that."*

The school does academic and/or emotional interventions with each child every day to make sure their potential is met. These are done by either TA's, teachers or in small groups.

The school makes an extra effort to get new Traveller families familiarised to school life. They offer new families the opportunity to visit the school and to call during school hours as it might be the first time some parents leave their children, even if they are in year 5.

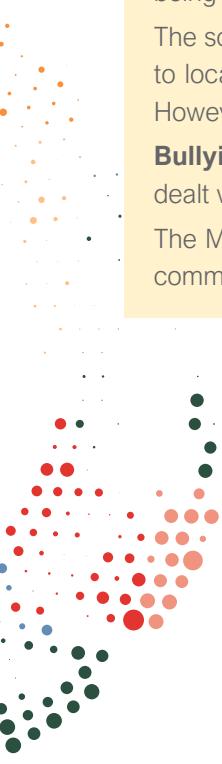
The school engages with Traveller parents with the help of a TA who visits the caravan sites once a week to give parents feedback on their children's progress, or help with paperwork, if required. They make contact with new families and start building relationships with parents of future students.

The staff makes sure that parents will get verbal reminders of every event and piece of information. The school has 'learning without limits' sessions where parents work alongside their children. Parents get to see what children are being taught and even learn themselves.

The school celebrates **GRT history and culture throughout the whole year**. For example, they arrange walks to local caravan sites where all children can visit chalets and caravans and hear about the history and culture. However, they feel that schools that don't have a large Traveller population should celebrate GRTHM.

**Bullying** because of someone's ethnicity rarely occurs at the Mount and is treated as racism. All incidents are dealt with a proactive educational purpose by talking with the children, and by informing the parents.

The Mount does transition work with secondary schools, trying to teach them to be more aware of the Traveller community and culture.



## Ash Manor, Comprehensive community secondary school, Surrey

**Approximately 10% of the students at the Ash Manor are English Romany Gypsies or Irish Travellers.**

*"My policy is very much that Traveller children are as good as any other child so therefore I expect them to perform as well as anyone in terms of exams etc. We had it a little bit tough at first in some ways but it's been really good since." – Head teacher*



The school recognises that Traveller parents can be suspicious around education partly because not all parents have completed their education. Therefore, in the past the school employed a Traveller woman who acted as a link between the school and the parents. Recently this employee resigned stating there is no need for her anymore.

If the staff suspect a parent has low literacy skills, they make a point to communicate verbally with them. The staff also helps parents to fill in forms e.g. to apply for free school meals.

The school makes an effort to make children feel welcome and wanted, and they have even helped parents to appeal against decisions in order to get children a place at Ash Manor. This work is known within the local Traveller community that helps in building trust.

With Traveller students whose families travel for work, the teachers make sure that they have laptops and take homework with them. They make sure all these children are up to date with schoolwork.

The school discourages Traveller parents from home educating and won't help them to write EHE letters.

*"I had an incident recently where a parent asked us to write the letter. We asked them to think about it, and the kid himself wanted to stay in school, and eventually dad let him stay in school. They didn't agree with how I was disciplining them although he was getting what everyone else was getting. After, I made a point going to see them and telling them how glad I am he stayed."*

Rather than celebrating **GRTHM**, or Black History Month for that matter, the children have a culture day where they have different foods, music and national costumes.

The school deals name calling incidents with restorative justice and physical bullying incidents according to their bullying policy. Traveller children are not bullied any more than other children at Ash Manor.

*"Be open be honest, be fair. Give everybody a fair hearing. If the child has done something wrong that doesn't comply with the school's rules then explain why. Believe in the kids, be aspirational for those children."*  
– Head teacher



# Summary and conclusions

Without a shadow of a doubt much more needs to be done to improve the educational outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in the UK. As this research demonstrates good practice exists, but it is often the result of strong senior leadership, rather than the expected norm within the average school.

As demonstrated in the aforementioned National Strategies and TARGET Model, we know what good practice is – it isn't necessary to reinvent the wheel. Improvements to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupil attainment requires time, flexibility, financial and social investment, and a commitment to equality and inclusion. As laid out in Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Gypsy Traveller Pupils: A Guide to Good Practice, good practice will improve inclusion, attainment and outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils.

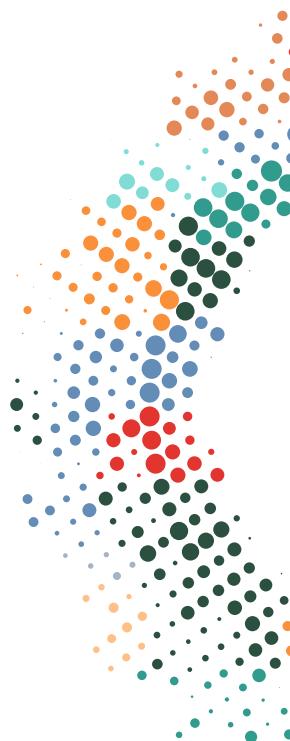
Poor responses to racial harassment, and weak anti-bullying policies undermine teachers, diminish trust in pupils and their parents and prevent the issue from being fully resolved. Responses to bullying requires a whole school approach<sup>15</sup>.

Many of the schools interviewed for this research followed Wilkin et al's (2009) GRT specific TARGET model. They provided an environment of safety and trust; they cultivated an ethos of respect; they are committed to access and inclusion; they provide some flexibility; and had high expectations of their pupils. They also worked in partnership with families, pupils and local communities. Schools that communicate openly enable better engagement with parents. Schools that use officious, business-like language often alienate parents, not just GRT, which inhibits effective communication and relationship building.

Additionally the schools exhibiting best practice have high expectations of all their pupils. They expect them to achieve and have the same outcomes as every other student.

Some head teachers stated quite plainly that they don't have specialist policies per se for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, but they endeavour to build inclusive and welcoming environments for incoming GRT students.

Some of the schools had a designated go-to person – and the educationalists suggested this as good practice – but as demonstrated by the schools interviewed for this project, once the teachers have been trained, and senior management are on board, then a designated member of staff, GRT or non-GRT should be sufficient.



15 <https://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/schools-and-teachers/whole-school-approach>

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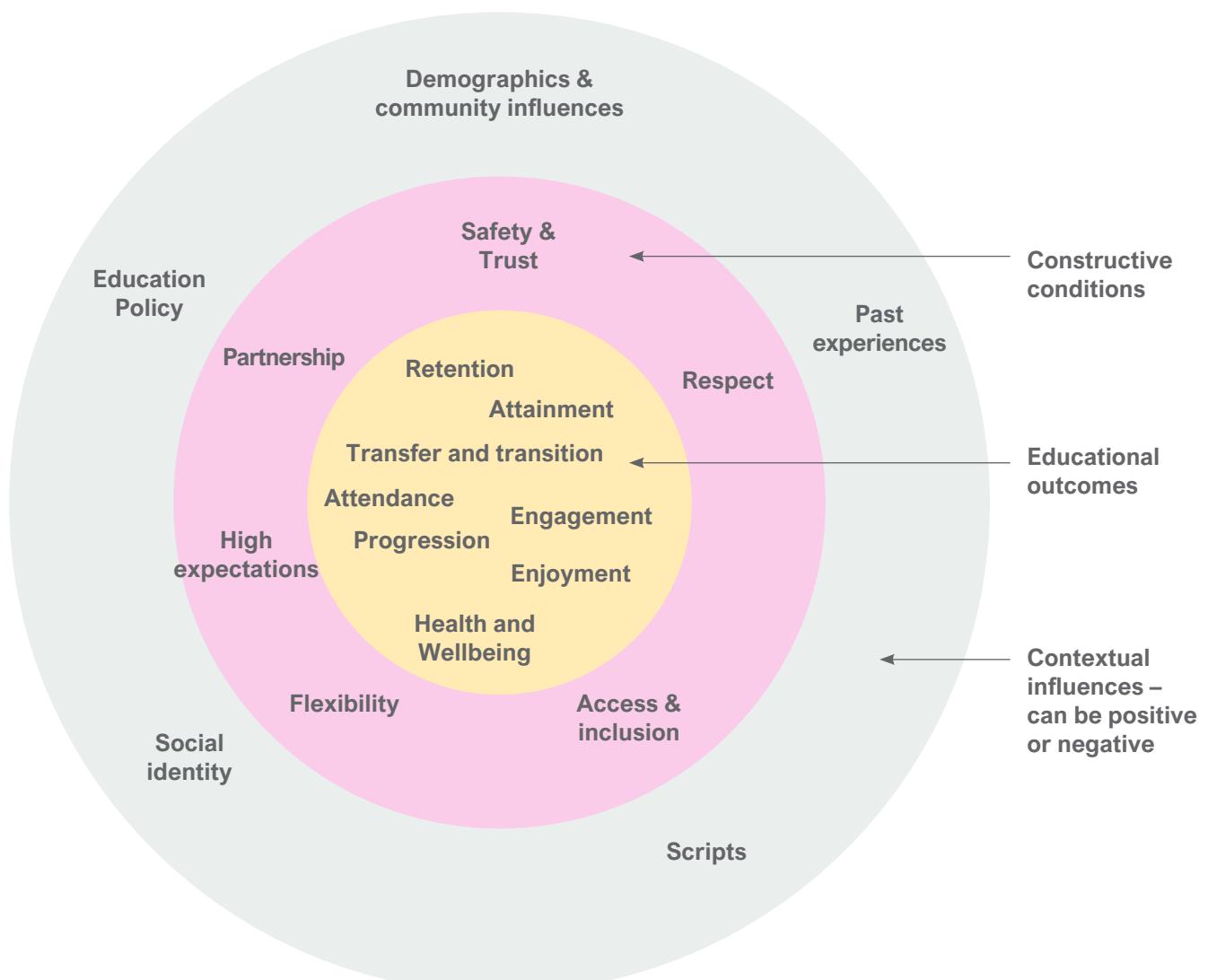
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# Appendices

## Appendix 1

The TARGET model: Traveller And Roma Gypsy Education Tool

The Traveller and Roma Gypsy Education Tool (TARGET) shown diagrammatically above emerged as a result of the analysis in Wilkin et al (2009) case-study data and was first introduced as an analytical model in 2009 (Wilkin et al., 2009).

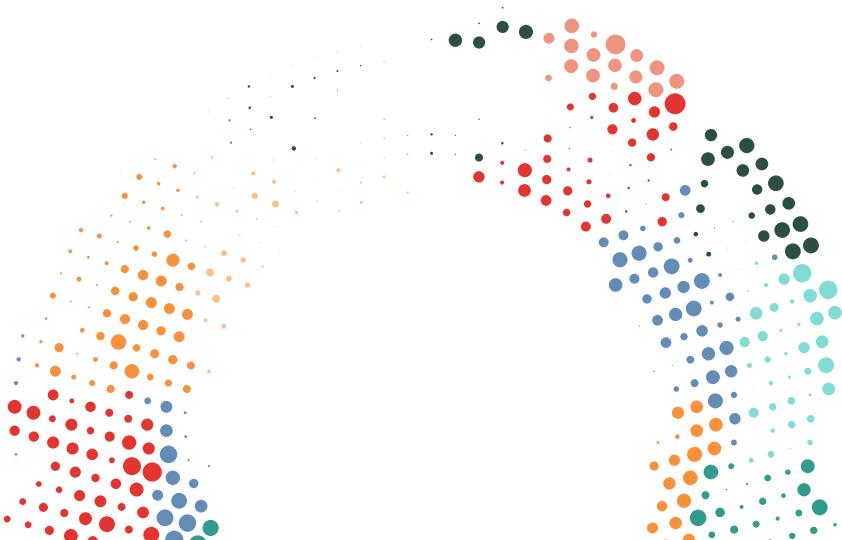


## Appendix 2

### How schools can raise the achievement of gypsy traveller pupils

- **The experience of racism and social exclusion:** Gypsy Traveller pupils can be treated unfairly and less equally than others, often without intent and knowledge, because of policies and practices in place in some schools. For example, they are disproportionately represented amongst pupils who are excluded.
- **Teacher knowledge and expectations:** A lack of knowledge of the communities, lifestyles, cultures and languages can lead to schools being unaware that it is beneficial for pupils to see their home culture reflected in a positive way in the school curriculum and respected in school organisation. Low expectations, which may be based on misplaced ideas that the pupils will not be staying long in the school or unchallenged stereotypes, can lead to them not being encouraged to reach their potential.
- **Parental education and aspirations:** Many Gypsy Traveller parents have had little or no education or have had poor quality experiences, especially in secondary schools. They often have few literacy skills making it difficult for them to know how best to support their children. Some parents also do not appreciate the relevance of the secondary curriculum to their children's future and see it as undermining their own values and aspirations for their children.
- **Interrupted educational experience:** Families may be working seasonally or are subject to unpredictable forced movement, hindering access to school or to a lower priority given to school attendance.
- **Informed leadership and an ethos of respect** which creates a school culture in which the needs of Gypsy Traveller pupils are effectively addressed. Head teachers, governors and senior managers with a clear understanding and commitment to promoting equality find that the barriers facing these pupils can be dismantled by their clear and positive leadership.
- **Training, which raises expectations and enhances all staffs' knowledge and understanding** is essential so that the school can take collective responsibility for challenging negative stereotypes and promoting good practice.
- **A culturally relevant and affirming curriculum** is important for all pupils. It is particularly important for children and young people from Gypsy Traveller backgrounds to see their culture, history, language and values reflected in their school experience. All schools, whether or not Gypsy Travellers are on roll, should have resources in classrooms and libraries which give a positive view of their culture and lifestyle. This adds to the quality and accuracy of knowledge for all children.

From Aiming High: *Raising the Achievement of Gypsy Traveller Pupils – A Guide to Good Practice* (2003:4)  
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The Traveller Movement



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