

the Traveller  
Movement

# Fought not Taught

Addressing Coercive Exclusions of Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller Children



**November 2024**

## About the Traveller Movement

The Traveller Movement is a registered UK charity promoting inclusion and community engagement with to Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers. The Traveller Movement seeks to empower and support Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities to advocate for the full implementation of their human rights.

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# Foreword



**Pauline Melvin  
Anderson OBE**

*Chair of the  
Traveller Movement*

Every child has a right to an education and the right to feel safe and valued in their school. Unfortunately, this report reveals that for many Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller children, this is far from their lived reality. For too many, their school experiences are overshadowed by racialised bullying and staggering levels of racial stereotyping leading to unfairly low expectations from some teachers, and mistreatment by decision-makers. The educational environment is too often toxic for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children – a phenomenon the Traveller Movement has recently termed “institutionally coerced exclusion”. There are notable exceptions to this across the country where schools are doing a great job with our children and young people, but this is not universal.

It is essential that all schools now move to dismantle the discriminatory practices and policies embedded where they exist. These practices particularly disenfranchise Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller communities, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and marginalisation. For generations, school has typically been a site of racialised bullying, stereotyping and punitive policies for these communities, unfortunately reflecting the negative attitudes of wider society. True progress will require a deep recognition of this long and painful history and a commitment to understanding the unique challenges faced by these children and their families.

The systemic exclusion of Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller children from the education system—driven by both overt and covert institutional factors—has ripple effects throughout their lives and within their communities. The wellbeing of these children must be placed at the heart of efforts to address low attendance, high exclusion rates, and the cycle of lost learning opportunities.

We must shift towards an asset-based approach, recognising the strengths, resilience, and contributions of Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller children and their communities. By fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment, we can ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive and succeed.

As Chair of the Traveller Movement, an Irish Traveller, and someone who has dedicated their career to education, I am deeply committed to the work of advocating for these changes. This report is a call to action, not just for educators but for all stakeholders in the wider education system. We want to support all schools to become as inclusive as the best. Together, we can help to build schools where every child and young person feels safe, valued, and empowered.

# Introduction

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people have the lowest attainment of all ethnic groups across all key stages. At primary school only 18% of Romani (Gypsy)/Roma and 21% of Irish Traveller children achieved the expected standard of development in comparison with 65% of all ethnic groups.<sup>1</sup> At GCSE level the picture is even worse. Indeed, the figures show that in the summer of 2023 only 16% of Romani (Gypsy)/Roma and 31% of Irish Traveller attained GCSEs in English and maths at grade 4 or above – which the DfE describes as a ‘standard pass’, the lowest percentage of all ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup> Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers were also the least likely to continue in education past GCSE level. The low attainment rate of these communities has improved over the years but remains a considerable issue which has gone largely ignored by successive governments – a level of institutional indifference to the continued marginalisation and widespread discrimination against Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities.

This low attainment goes hand-in-hand with the high levels of exclusions, elective home schooling, and absenteeism amongst Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children. As was concluded in the Timpson Review of School Exclusions, certain characteristics leave children at a higher risk of being excluded but that the risk is greatest when an individual has overlapping risk factors such as ethnicity and SEND. The overlapping inequalities faced by children from these communities coupled with insurmountable levels of discriminatory attitudes leave Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children at a greater risk of poor experiences within the education system.

The Timpson Review of School Exclusions found that exclusions are issued overwhelmingly to children who already face significant challenges in their lives; finding that ‘78% of permanent exclusions issued were to pupils who either had SEN, were classified as in need or were eligible for free school meals. 11% of permanent exclusions were to pupils who had all three characteristics’.<sup>3</sup> A system which comprehensively fails its most vulnerable children is one which requires radical change. The Traveller Movement promotes the importance of schools recognising and supporting the reality and complexity of all students’ lives. Schools often create two-tiered responses to additional needs: one response for those whose needs are recognised and another for children whose vulnerabilities are less understood. The latter response often means that many children fall through the gaps.<sup>4</sup> The particular positioning of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children and their experiences within this structure must be acknowledged. The experiences of these communities within the education system are undoubtedly characterised by large scale institutional racism.

For Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children educational settings are often where they experience bullying, punitive school policies and low expectations based solely on their ethnicity. An essential element of this paper is the recognition of the long history of ‘stigmatisation, dehumanisation, marginalisation and hostility towards Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities both in the UK and in Europe’ which has been resistant to change and is ‘insidious and infiltrating all parts of society including the public psyche’.<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper the Traveller Movement will analyse the different ways in which educational institutions comprehensively fail Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children – a phenomenon The Traveller Movement has termed “institutionally coerced exclusions”.

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1 [Gypsies and travellers: educational outcomes](#), House of Commons Library, (2024).

2 [ibid.](#)

3 [Timpson Review of School Exclusion](#), (2019), p.10.

4 [IPPR & The Difference, Who is Losing Learning](#), (2024).

5 Julia Morgan, Chelsea McDonagh & Thomas Acton (2023) Outsider status, and racialised habitus: the experiences of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller students in higher education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 44:3, 485-503, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2023.2167702.



# What is an Institutionally Coerced Exclusion?

An institutionally coerced exclusion is a term used by the Traveller Movement to describe how schools, either through action or inaction, create a persistently toxic educational environment, forcing children and their families to withdraw from formal educational environments. This exclusion may not necessarily involve formal expulsion or suspension but rather the creation of conditions that make it untenable or unsafe for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children to remain enrolled in the school. Further to this it includes the behavioural management systems and formal exclusion processes which are disproportionately used against Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children.

This term acknowledges the systemic issues within the educational system that marginalise or discriminate against Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities, leading to their exclusion from mainstream education. For instance, schools are required to implement a behaviour policy, yet very few policies make suitable reference to race and ethnicity. Casework taken on by the Traveller Movement's Equality and Social Justice Unit reveals that the racist behaviour of some pupils towards Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller pupils often goes unchallenged. Schools are sometimes unaware that Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people are distinct ethnic groups with protection under the Equality Act 2010 ('the Equality Act'). The cumulative effect is that Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children often feel unwelcome or unsafe in school, which in turn impacts attendance rates and educational attainment. As a result, Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller parents may feel forced to opt for home education for fear of the racist treatment their children may face at school. Schools are required to protect the rights of all children, on the basis of their race or religious belief, and therefore must set clear standards to ensure that all pupils are equally held to account and protected against bullying under the behaviour policy.

## Case Study: 'Seat at the Table'

The Traveller Movement received a report from a mother whose family are Romany (Gypsy) that her son, aged five, was forbidden by the teacher from sitting at a table alongside his peers. Instead, he was given a space of his own in the corner of the classroom on the floor. This five-year-old boy was the only child in the class required to do so. This arrangement continued for several weeks because the school was overwhelmed with complaints from other parents stating that they did not want their child interacting with a 'Gypsy'. When the teacher was satisfied with the five-year-old's behaviour, he was then allowed to sit at the table. However, this only happened after the parents had complained to the school. The parents reported that the day their five-year-old son was allowed to sit at a table with other children, he was very happy, which they found deeply saddening.

Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children often report feeling as though they have to prove themselves in order to be accepted by those outside their communities. There is often a sense that negative assumptions based on harmful ethnicity-based stereotypes need to be disproved before acceptance is given. The stigma attached to being a member of the Romani (Gypsy), Roma and/or Irish Traveller communities, compounded by the exclusionary behaviour made manifest through racist bullying often causes children to view school as a place that is 'not for them'. Racist bullying can have a profound effect on the wellbeing of the child being bullied and can lead to persistent non-attendance. Matters may worsen in instances where the school acts to challenge non-attendance but fails to address the underlining reasons for this non-attendance, placing the child and their parents in a pressurised position. A common theme that has emerged from the Traveller Movement's extensive casework in this area is as follows: a Romani (Gypsy), Roma and/or Irish Traveller child retaliates physically to physical or verbal bullying, and the retaliation becomes the grounds for their exclusion. Sadly, this is often where the road to exclusion enters its final stages.



# Recommendations

The Department for Education (DfE) must develop a statutory framework to ensure that all incidents of racism and racist bullying in schools are monitored, recorded and reported centrally to both the DfE and relevant local authority. The DfE must also ensure a race equality & diversity policy is made a statutory element of the Public Sector Equality Duty for all schools.

The DfE must reinstate specific references to Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller communities in the Attendance Guidance<sup>6</sup>, including the 'T code,' which allows these communities to travel for work without penalties for non-attendance. The recent shift to the generic term 'mobile child' diminishes the recognition of these ethnic groups' unique cultural practices and contributes to their erasure. Clear, specific references to Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller children should be maintained to ensure that schools are aware of the distinct needs and protections of the ethnic communities, safeguarding these communities' cultural heritage and way of life.

The DfE should require all schools to revise their behaviour and safeguarding policies to explicitly address race and ethnicity, with specific guidance on supporting Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller pupils. This should include mandatory training for staff on these communities' cultural heritage, their legal protections under the Equality Act, and the unique challenges they face in the education system.

Schools should develop tailored support systems for Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller pupils, including academic support, access to mental health services and pastoral care, and family engagement initiatives. Local authorities must also provide resources and guidance to schools on fostering positive relationships with these communities to prevent disengagement and to ensure improved educational outcomes.



<sup>6</sup> Department for Education, [Working together to improve school attendance](#): Statutory guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools and local authorities, (2024).



# Mechanisms of Institutionally Coercive Exclusions

## > Discriminatory Practices and Biases

### Institutional indifference

There remains a lack of understanding amongst the wider population that Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities are distinct ethnic groups. This is clearly demonstrated by a YouGov poll conducted by the Traveller Movement in 2017 which found that two-thirds of the of the population do not believe that Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller are ethnic groups.<sup>7</sup> The impact that this institutional indifference to the traditions, cultures and histories of Romani (Gypsies), Roma and Irish Travellers has on the different communities should not be underestimated. In order to properly tackle the inequalities experienced by Romani (Gypsies), Roma and Irish Travellers within the realm of education, there needs to be an institutional acknowledgement of its failings and proactive steps to improve institutional understanding of the communities, which will in turn help to bridge these attainment gaps.

Institutional indifference is 'an ignorance that is not one of blissful unawareness or innocent absence of knowledge, but rather of rational calculation'.<sup>8</sup> For instance, despite numerous governmental departments, research papers and international organisations calling for a whole governmental action to tackle disparities there has been no such action taken. The Women & Equalities Committee in their 2019 report titled 'Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities' stated that 'a poor start in education may be the catalyst for many other inequalities that we have heard about throughout this inquiry'.<sup>9</sup> This indifference is also reflected in the lack of consistent data monitoring across all governmental departments. This poses the question: if communities are not counted, how can their experiences be measured, or their inequalities be tackled?

Institutional indifference can be seen at the root of the disenfranchisement of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities with many of those in power acknowledging the extent of the inequalities faced by the communities and yet failing to address them. Although institutional change is essential, what is often overlooked is the importance of institutional recognition of past failures. Such recognition is required if these inequalities are to be sufficiently addressed.

For many young people, but especially the often isolationist Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities, school is the first 'formal institution' that they come into contact within their lives. There is a deep historical mistrust of institutions within the communities which is rooted in their long history of trauma and mistreatment by the hands of institutions. This trauma and history are passed down through community members, fostering fear and mistrust of those within institutions. In these first connections with the wider community young Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children they often find their ethnicity, culture and history being treated as a negative and a detractor from their educational journey. This treatment mirrors the wider public treatment of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities.

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<sup>7</sup> YouGov/Traveller Movement Results, (2017).

<sup>8</sup> OpenDemocracy, *From Windrush to Universal Credit – the art of 'institutional indifference'*, (2018).

<sup>9</sup> [Women & Equalities Select Committee](#), Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, (2019) para. 54.



## Case Study: 'Travellers Need Not Apply'

The Traveller Movement received a report of a young Irish Traveller girl who is registered at her primary school as an Irish Traveller with an 87.5% attendance rate. The girl's attendance rate is linked to her family's frequent travelling for fairs. The primary school is understanding of her culture and the teachers are very inclusive and understanding, using the T code for when she travels. She was very keen to go to secondary school and was looking forward to going to a local school which her friends were also attending. Her family were very supportive of this decision. Her mother applied to a school for her and received an acceptance. However, five minutes later they received an email to say she was accepted in error and had been rejected based on her attendance. Within the rejection the school enquired as to what 'Traveller Status' meant and dismissed the cultural reasons behind her low attendance.

## Treating ethnicity as a risk factor

The Traveller Movement has identified a trend amongst those employed within educational institutions through its casework and wider education policy work. Namely, that those employed in educational institutions often regard the cultures and traditions of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people as a risk factor and a liability to the development and growth of an individual. More perniciously, Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children are often seen as a risk to the schools' ranking and 'success' in league tables and other measures. The Traveller Movement understands that such views impact almost every aspect of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers' experiences of public services, particularly within education. These misguided perceptions of the communities, combined with the fundamental lack of understanding of the histories of the communities and/or the fact that Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller ethnicities are recognised as distinct ethnic groups under UK legislation, represent just some of the issues facing Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children in education.

Teachers and the wider school community will often label children as 'difficult' or see them as destined for failure from the moment they enter a school. This is particularly acute for children from Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children as the wider public perception of the communities they come from is, by and large, negative. A YouGov poll<sup>10</sup> which looked at discriminatory attitudes towards the communities highlights this; with 45% of people admitting they would be uncomfortable with a Gypsy or Traveller moving next door to them; and 38% would be uncomfortable with their child meeting up with a Gypsy or Traveller child at their home, there is no denying that this entrenched view of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities has an effect on the way children are treated within schools.

This must also be understood within the historical context of the forced assimilation of Romani (Gypsies), Roma and Irish Travellers who have often across time been victims of 're-education programmes.' Such programmes have attempted to separate the communities from their culture and traditions through means of 'education'. There therefore exists within the communities an inherent belief that formal education is a means to remove Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children from their culture and to make them 'country people'.<sup>11</sup>

This belief is not helped by a general lack of cultural awareness by schools and educational institutions which consistently frame the culture, heritage and traditions of these communities in a negative light and as a risk factor to their education.

<sup>10</sup> YouGov/Traveller Movement Results, (2017).

<sup>11</sup> Irish Traveller slang for any person who is a non-Traveller, all communities use different words to mean non-community members.





## **This personal story from a young Romani (Gypsy) demonstrates instances of such behaviour.**

*“When I was 10 years old, the primary school that myself and the other Gypsies in the area all went to was closed down. We all moved to another school in the area as a group. I was in my last year so only attended for around 9 months, but there was always Gypsies in that school moving forwards.*

*There hadn't been Gypsies in the school before and I don't think the head teacher knew anything about our way of life, culture and traditions. Upon entering the school, we all felt eyes on us and a real nervous energy from the teachers.*

*I began settling into the new school and got used to the stricter nature of this environment compared to my old school, who celebrated Gypsy culture and had huge displays up in the corridors about our language (Rumnus) and encouraged us to talk about our way of life.*

*Little by little though, we all began to experience negative interactions with teachers and specifically the head teacher. It began by us all being pulled into a classroom where we were told that we could no longer speak in Rumnus during school time as no one else could understand it. However, we spoke in English 99% of the time and only used the odd word to each other. This was extremely difficult for lots of the students, as they used the words constantly and found it almost impossible to erase words from their language. If students failed to stop using Rumnus, there would be repercussions such as being asked to leave the classroom for 5-10 minutes.*

*The next thing to happen, was being told that we couldn't sit together at lunchtime. All Gypsies were split up and one was allocated per table. Again, this was very difficult as people were ripped out of their friendship groups and were scared to be seen talking to close friends and cousins. I'd also add that there were absolutely no negative incidents in the lunch hall prior to this change – it had just been noted that other students felt 'intimidated' by the groups sitting together.*

*A week later, we were forbidden to play together at break time. We were monitored by extra staff walking around the playground. Half of the children ended up sitting alone at opposite ends of the playground as peers wouldn't allow them to play/talk to them.*

*There were serious amounts of bullying that never got addressed. None of the children were awarded certificates (even though some were thriving in lessons), and children were never allowed to carry out classroom responsibilities, such as taking the register to reception etc.*

*Overall, it was a humiliating couple of years with all of this school policy going unchecked. Children withdrew, and even developed phobias of eating after being put into really uncomfortable positions in the lunch hall. I'm pleased to report that after a change of Head Teacher, there are a number of Gypsies attending this primary school 10 years on, and things are much better.”*

## **Low teacher expectations – a self-fulfilling prophecy**

A common theme identified within the Traveller Movement's casework and across its wider policy work is the low expectations that teachers have of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children. This is similar to the experiences of other minority ethnic groups, particularly Black Caribbean boys, within education. It is important to recognise that although social class is a huge indicator for teacher expectations, ethnicity and race can be a determining factor in informing a teachers view of a child and their capacity to achieve. Often this is particularly acute for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children who face intersecting inequalities and unchecked biases.

Research<sup>12</sup> suggests that the expectations that teachers have for students, often formed by their views on the child's race, ethnicity, gender and other protected characteristics, have a significant effect on that child's likelihood to achieve. Low expectations, often informed by bias, mean teachers alter their behaviour towards different students, setting lower expectations for some, offering limited or no feedback on mistakes, giving less positive reinforcement for correct answers, and allowing less time for students to respond to questions. When these behaviours are repeated consistently over a year or multiple school years, they can hinder student performance and reinforce the achievement gaps that persist in the education system.

## Case Study – Let Kids be Kids

David is an Irish Traveller who attends primary school. He has a close relationship with a non-community member, and they often play football together in the schoolyard. On one occasion David and his friend were playing football in the yard and while tackling one another, the Deputy Head Principal, who David felt was often discriminatory towards him, came over and asked David's friend if David was being too rough and if he was annoying him. David felt very uncomfortable playing in the yard after this.

Low expectations of a child can develop into a self-fulfilling prophecy, particularly if those expectations are connected to a teacher's view of the ethnic group which that child comes from, and the 'typical' behaviour of that ethnic group. This is often called the Pygmalion Effect, summarised by Rosenthal & Babad (1985) as thus: 'When we expect certain behaviours of others, we are likely to act in ways that make the expected behaviour more likely to occur'.<sup>13</sup> A study by Gentrup et al. (2020)<sup>14</sup> shows that often having higher expectations than the child's believed ability could have a very positive effect on their achievement.

Gilborn et al. (2012) investigated teacher expectations of Black Caribbean children specifically from middle class families and found that despite their 'material and cultural capital,' they were still 'thwarted by racist stereotyping and exclusion'.<sup>15</sup> The article looks beyond the narrative of white working-class failure and at the powerful effect ethnicity has on teacher expectations and their link to eventual academic achievement. The belief in a person's ability to succeed is often shaped by how society perceives the value of their community, especially in terms of ethnicity. If a particular ethnic group is viewed as having low worth or status, this perception can influence how individuals from that community are judged, particularly by institutions like schools. This creates a cycle where low expectations lead to fewer opportunities, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting the potential for academic and personal success. Insights from the Traveller Movement's casework indicate that there exists a widespread belief amongst teachers that Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities do not value education. In these instances, a wider narrative of an individual child is created without knowing the ambitions or views of that child. Gilborn et al.<sup>16</sup> highlights that parents and children can have high expectations and aspirations for their futures and can have all the material and cultural resources necessary, but this does nothing for teachers' expectations of their academic ability. Children will still experience heightened surveillance and be perceived as more likely to make trouble.

12 Rosenthal, R., & Babad, E. Y. (1985). Pygmalion in the gymnasium. *Educational leadership*, 43(1), 36-39

13 Rosenthal, R., & Babad, E. Y. (1985). Pygmalion in the gymnasium. *Educational leadership*, 43(1), 36-39 p.36.

14 Gentrup, S., Lorenz, G., Kristen, C., & Kogan, I. (2020). Self-fulfilling prophecies in the classroom: Teacher expectations, teacher feedback and student achievement. *Learning and Instruction*, 66, 101296.

15 Gillborn, David, Nicola Rollock, Carol Vincent, and Stephen J. Ball. "'You got a pass, so what more do you want?': Race, class and gender intersections in the educational experiences of the Black middle class." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 15, no. 1 (2012): 121-139.

16 Ibid, p. 137.







# Discriminatory Policies

The adoption of zero tolerance behaviour policies, and overly punitive policies in schools in general no doubt has a disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities particularly Black Caribbean and Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers.<sup>17</sup> This punitive and disproportionate policy application is no clearer than when you assess the exclusion rates of these groups. A recent report authored by the Difference and IPPR shows that Irish Travellers are three times more likely than the national population to be permanently excluded, Romani (Gypsy) and Roma children are four times more likely and Black Caribbean 1.5 times more likely.<sup>18</sup>

Within the current education policy landscape is the idea that there is a behaviour crisis within schools, with teachers often noting that bad behaviour has become unmanageable. In 2012 the Department for Education conducted research into behaviour in schools citing 'low-level bad behaviour' as chatter and inattention in the classroom to be the most prevalent form within schools. The Children and Young Peoples Mental Health Coalition has said that bad behaviour within education can be characterised as 'behaviour that schools do not want, as opposed to behaviours they do want'.<sup>19</sup> The Traveller Movement advocates for a move away from the idea of 'badly behaved' children and towards a more holistic approach to understanding a child's actions within an educational environment, acknowledging that schools can be distressing places for many young people. So-called bad behaviour does not arise out of a singular issue but is often caused by several interrelated factors within a child's life. Indeed, it can often be a communication of need or a reaction to unmet needs for that child.

Although the Department for Education has a Behaviour Policy Guidance, each school has a duty to formulate their own Behaviour Policy with that guidance in mind. As a result, there is no single behaviour management framework across all schools. Rather, school leaders make choices on what is best for their school and area. However, the Children and Young Peoples Mental Health Coalition found that schools over prioritise reactive models of behaviour management and that management techniques are often extremely sanction heavy. The Coalition identified very few preventative actions in teaching children's behaviours which will allow them to thrive. It is clear that a 'one size fits all' model of behaviour management, which does not take account of the individual child's needs, culture and background, is not fit for purpose.

This has a particular effect on children with diagnosed SEND who often are at the sharp end of behaviour policies which are inflexible and overly focused on sanctions. When young people were surveyed, 21% of respondents strongly disagreed, and 29% disagreed that schools are effectively responsive to SEN and disabilities in behaviour management.<sup>20</sup> This is often the result of a lack of understanding on the part of the school and mislabelling a child as 'naughty' or 'difficult'.

Children with high needs levels, such as those who are diagnosed SEND or those with English as an additional language must be provided with appropriate support by schools. According to the 2023/24 education statistics, pupils from the Traveller of Irish heritage ethnic group have the highest prevalence of Special Educational Needs (SEN). In 2024, 25.9% of these pupils received SEN support, while an additional 7.3% had an Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plan.<sup>21</sup> However, it is essential to note that although data points to high levels of SEND in the communities, it is possible that teachers are wrongly identifying lost learning or cultural differences as special needs as a result of negative bias. Schools often have challenges in securing funding for supporting these additional needs. This financial burden can put schools with a large number of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller pupils at risk, potentially impacting their willingness and ability to enrol and support these students, especially when funding is limited.<sup>22</sup>

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17 Children & Young People Mental Health Coalition, [Behaviour and mental health in schools](#), (2023).

18 IPPR & The Difference, [Who Is Losing Learning?](#), (2024).

19 Children & Young People Mental Health Coalition, [Behaviour and mental health in schools](#), (2023).

20 Children and Young Peoples Mental Health Coalition, [Behaviour and Mental Health in Schools](#), (2024).

21 GOV.UK Statistics, [Special Educational Needs in the UK](#), (2024).

22 Ofsted, [The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2013/14](#), (2014).



In 2012 the Children's Commissioner noted the important role played by ethnicity in the overuse of sanctions in behaviour management contexts. Noting 'a lack of understanding of how to manage children with differing abilities, cultural and relational expectations, may lead – in our view unnecessarily – to confrontations between teachers and children, increasing the likelihood of specific groups of children meeting disciplinary problems, and ultimately being excluded'.<sup>23</sup>

Previous research conducted by the Traveller Movement demonstrates how behaviour policies often fail to consider the behavioural and cultural norms of different ethnic groups and can lead to some in those groups being labelled as disruptive and aggressive. This is often linked to the adultification of particular ethnic groups. In the case of Irish Traveller children, adultification may manifest as the interpretation of a child's behaviour as overly aggressive and overestimating the risk posed by the children. Research by the Traveller Movement found that 67% of young Gypsies and Travellers in London had experienced bullying from teachers that they felt was directly linked to their ethnicity.<sup>24</sup>

## Case Study: Well-spoken for a Traveller

Patrick is an Irish Traveller, he is five-years-old and has diagnosed autism and has certain sensory issues and additional needs. The school is aware of these additional needs and has been providing for both and his sister Fiona, who also has diagnosed autism and ADHD and has an Education Health Care Plan. Part of Patrick's additional needs means he requires gravy with his lunch every day. One day this was not provided, and Patrick began to behave poorly, screaming and using bad language to teachers and staff and trying to escape the premises. The school issued him with a fixed term exclusion of one day.

When the mother attempted to speak to the Head Teacher, she felt as though she wasn't being listened to and was instead shamed for her son's behaviour. Throughout this conversation the Head Teacher repeatedly patronised her and said that she was very well-spoken, seemingly implying that she was well-spoken for an Irish Traveller. The mother who feels strongly about her children being educated now feels that this is not a safe environment for her child.

## Cultural Barriers v. School Structures

Research conducted by the Traveller Movement suggests that there are key clashes between the priorities of mainstream education and the priorities of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities. The lack of flexibility in mainstream education and the 'one size fits all' policies often leave Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller families feeling as though they must choose between education and maintaining their culture and heritage, which they believe is being eroded little by little.

## School is not a place for me if I can't see myself in it

Although coercive exclusions are often characterised by both passive and active hostilities there is another powerful factor which can make Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children feel like educational institutions are not for them; the absence of themselves, their families and their history, culture and heritage from the curriculum. A sense of belonging plays an essential role in a child's engagement with and experience of education. Students who foster a sense of belonging are more likely to remain in education.<sup>25</sup> However, Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers are so rarely made to feel like they belong, and the lack of inclusion of their cultural histories within the curriculum is testament to this.

<sup>23</sup> Children's Commissioner, *They never give up on you*, Office of the Children's Commissioner School Exclusions Inquiry, (2017).

<sup>24</sup> <https://wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/GRT-in-Secondary-Education-2021.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Allen, K.-A., Vella-Brodick, D., & Waters, L. (2016). Fostering School Belonging in Secondary Schools Using a Socio-Ecological Framework. *The Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, 33(1), 97–121. doi:10.1017/edp.2016.5.



Research conducted by the Traveller Movement indicates that Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children want their history and culture included in the curriculum and to be represented in a positive way. In particular, history lessons on the Holocaust often exclude the Holocaust of Roma and Sinti people, despite the fact that historians estimate that up to 500,000 Roma and Sinti people were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators.

Whilst it is important for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children to have their history and cultures reflected in the curriculum, it is also important for the other children to learn about it. In order to break down barriers of understanding it is essential for British students of all ethnicities to 'better understand the dynamic world they inhabit'.<sup>26</sup>

## Language and Literacy Issues

Low literacy levels are common among Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller adults, with some studies suggesting up to a 62% illiteracy rate.<sup>27</sup> This means that form filling, communicating by email or reading letters can be very difficult for Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller parents, and certain help is not available to their children, such as assistance with homework.

Accessing any core public service is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to navigate with low literacy levels. Low literacy levels thus may hamper a parent's ability to access educational support services for their child and parents may be unaware of the support they can access. This issue is compounded for Roma parents, with English often being their fifth language and therefore there are additional language barriers faced by these families.

Schools and other public services will therefore communicate in ways which are completely inaccessible for many Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller parents and families with very little outreach made to the families if they are seen as 'disengaged'. This will manifest in the mantra 'the communities are hard to reach'.<sup>28</sup> However, research by the Traveller Movement has found that when the communities do reach out to services, the support they are offered is often inaccessible to them.

## Nomadic lifestyle

It is a common misconception that Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities are predominantly mobile in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Successive legislative changes have made difficult if not impossible to continue the traditional way of life. For those who do wish to continue education and engage in a nomadic lifestyle the current format of mainstream education is not conducive to this. Richard O'Neill, a prominent storyteller, spoke about these difficulties theorising that: 'School is generally linear and Travelling people, having a nomadic culture, are generally more circular in their thinking and doing'.<sup>29</sup> Often schools and educational institutes are not open to altering the curriculum or the manner of teaching to facilitate these cultural differences, forcing many Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller families to opt for Home Education.

The 'T code,' which permits Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller communities to travel for work without facing fines for non-attendance, is a vital protection of their cultural practices. However, recent updates to the Attendance Guidance have removed specific references to these ethnic groups, replacing them with the more generic term 'mobile child'. While this may seem like a minor change, failure to identify the ethnic communities explicitly contributes to a growing sense of erasure within these communities.

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26 Runnymede, *Teaching Migration, Belonging, and Empire in Secondary Schools*, (2019).

27 Dorset Council, *Sustainability appraisal scoping paper*, (2019).

28 Margaret Greenfields, *Good practice in working with Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities*, (2017).

29 Dr Laura Brassington, *Gypsies, Roma and Travellers: The ethnic minorities most excluded from UK education*, (2022) p. 48.



## Lack of cultural capital and knowledge

Due to generationally low attainment rates and very poor experiences of their own time in education there is very little knowledge among community members about how to navigate the education system. This, coupled with very low cultural and economic capital among community members makes the complex internal workings of an educational institution very difficult to get around.

Limited understanding of the education system and a lack of cultural capital to navigate it continue to pose challenges, which may worsen as students' progress beyond compulsory education to further and higher education. Historically, even fewer Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller individuals attended higher education than today, leaving many parents unaware of how the system works or what 'a higher education' truly involves. This makes navigating systems as a community member more difficult and innately inaccessible.

This can be seen particularly in the experiences of Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller young people who do progress to higher education. With universities for many being the institutions which engaged most in the civilising process, privileging the knowledge and power of the dominant groups while marginalising, stigmatising and devaluing other forms of knowledge. This historical exclusion means Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers are more likely to lack 'cultural capital', this capital is generational with past generations passing down institutional power, social status and knowledge. Thus, those that possess this cultural capital have a legacy of deciding what is and what is not important knowledge. Therefore, what is considered important knowledge to Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers communities often does not align with these educational institutions.<sup>30</sup> Often those who proceed to higher education are forced to 'play white' in order to conform to accepted and established ideas of white cultural capital, leading them to downplay their own cultural traditions and identities.<sup>31</sup>



30 Moskal, M. (2014) Language and cultural capital in school experience of Polish children in Scotland. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*.

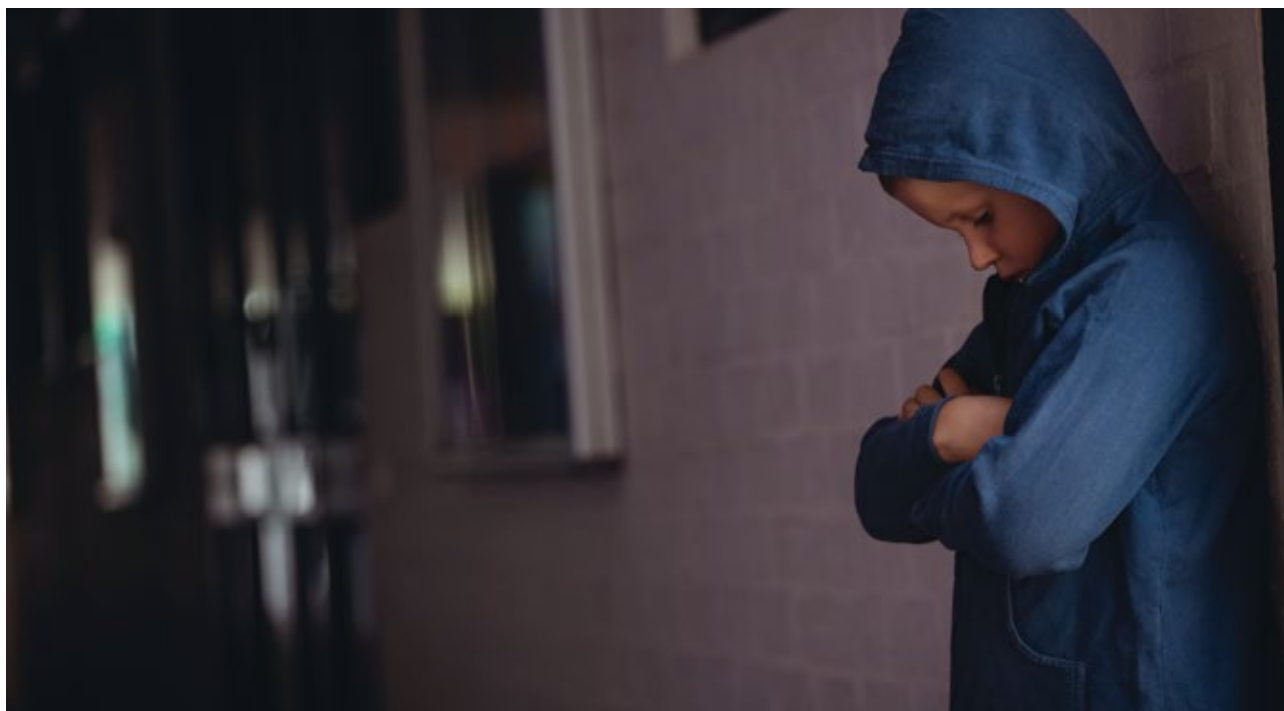
31 Julia Morgan, Chelsea McDonagh & Thomas Acton (2023) Outsider status, and racialised habitus: the experiences of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller students in higher education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 44:3, 485-503, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2023.2167702.

## Cultural expectation or ‘a more valuable education’

What is seen to be valuable and valued for young people in Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller young people is often incompatible with what is valuable for educational institutions. The Traveller Movement’s Roads to Success<sup>32</sup> report highlighted this clash finding that many Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller young people view the education system as it stands as being incompatible with the lives that they lead.

In the report, many Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers described academic subjects as being irrelevant for them and expressed a desire for schools to take their cultural and individual preferences into consideration. With many feeling that primary school teaches them necessary skills such as basic reading, writing and mathematics and the skills and material taught at the secondary level did not effectively reflect the skills they require for their desired career or lifestyle. With the young people interviewed by the Traveller Movement expressing. In addition, many of the young people interviewed expressed a desire for practical career guidance at primary school level or the ability to open vocational training for younger people. Whilst a majority of the young people interviewed did express interest in further training, most did not either know how, and/or were missing the necessary prerequisite qualifications.

There are strong social and family expectations to work in particular forms of employment. For boys and men this is often working for the family business or being self-employed. Self-employment has been a cultural tradition within Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller communities for centuries, and it is what most young people are familiar with. For boys and men, working outside the family business is especially challenging, as they are expected to follow in the footsteps of their elders. Those who deviate from this tradition may be seen as disloyal to their families. Women and girls will often work part-time in precarious employment but there is a strong cultural pressure to adhere to traditional gender roles such the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the homemaker. Breaking from these traditional roles can be difficult and can often result in being pushed out of the communities.



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32 Traveller Movement, [Roads to Success](#), (2022).

## Fear of assimilation

There is a strong focus within Romani (Gypsy) and Irish Traveller communities of a 'we-group' identity which emphasises strong solidarity and continuation of culture. This brings a fear of institutions which have a strong emphasis on the dominant cultural norms and fail to facilitate any break from that 'one size fits all' approach to education. These reservations are understandable considering the placement that Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities have within the wider society of the UK and the communities' experiences of the institutions of the State attempting to 'civilise' them through legislation and the slow criminalisation of a way of life, which culminated in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022.

Policy interventions often focus on community cohesion, empowerment, inclusion and social mobility which all centre the dominant culture as one which Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers ought to be incorporated into. Rather the question should be posed as to how in the face of such intense external pressure to assimilate have Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities remained relatively autonomous.<sup>33</sup> Policy interventions should take an assets-based approach which focuses on seeing the communities' traditions, cultures and heritages as a benefit to the wider community and to their own individual development and educational achievement.

There is often a strong emphasis on community socialisation from birth and the extended, intergenerational family group plays a vital role in socialisation, passing down cultural traditions, and providing protection from stigmatisation. This strong group feeling is kept alive through emotional, social, and physical separation from the larger society. With many, particularly women and girls, remaining within the extended family-grouping their whole lives, or at least until they marry. The huge amount of discrimination faced when Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers do interact in the wider social group further reinforces the isolation and protection afforded in that isolation.

*“The resistance to the merging of one’s own survival unit with a larger unit – or its disappearance into that unit – is undoubtedly due in large part to a particular feeling. It is the feeling that the fading or disappearance of a tribe or state as an autonomous entity would render meaningless everything which past generations had achieved and suffered in the framework and in the name of this survival unit. (..) The disappearance of cultural traditions during absorption into a larger unit does in fact mean, in this and similar cases, a kind of collective dying.”<sup>34</sup>*

[Elias 2001, pp. 222-223]

There is a great pride among the communities in their culture and heritage despite strong external pressures, which ought to be admired and to be seen as an asset.

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33 Powell, R. (2016). Gypsy-Travellers/Roma and Social Integration: Childhood, Habitus and the "We-I Balance". *Historical Social Research*, 41(3), 134-156. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.41.2016.3.134-156>.

34 *The Individualized Society* (Cambridge: Polity 2001).



## Conclusion

The systemic exclusion of Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller children from the education system, driven by both overt and subtle institutional factors, demands urgent and comprehensive reform. The concept of institutionally coerced exclusion highlights the failure of schools to provide safe, inclusive, and supportive environments for these communities, leading to disproportionately low attainment and high rates of absenteeism, exclusions, and home schooling. Addressing this issue requires schools to acknowledge the unique challenges faced by Romani (Gypsy), Roma, and Irish Traveller children and to proactively dismantle the discriminatory practices embedded within educational policies and cultures. By recognising and addressing the overlapping vulnerabilities of these communities, we can begin to ensure that every child, regardless of their ethnicity, has equal access to an education free from discrimination and exclusion. Ending the cycle of marginalisation must be a priority for policymakers, educators, and society as a whole to create a more equitable and inclusive education system.









The Traveller Movement would like to say a heartfelt  
**THANK YOU** to our funders for their support.

# MISSION 44

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