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Inclusive Educational Approaches - Gypsy/Traveller Pupils and their Families

Case Studies

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS AND TRAVELLERS

Introducing The Team

Fife Council has had a Traveller Education Service for 17 years. The current team of 2.5 teachers serve the Traveller communities on the three council run sites in Kelty, Kirkcaldy and Cupar, a private site in Lochgelly, and the many other families living in houses, or on unauthorised encampments, throughout Fife. Some of these Gypsy and Traveller families are highly mobile and attend many different schools for varying periods of time. In an academic year approximately 200 pupils will have attended a primary or secondary school in Fife.

This case study describes how Fife Council's Traveller Education Service staff, Ingrid Todd, Gillian Cameron and Christine Maxwell, supported by David Watson, Support Services Manager, have worked with Traveller families and staff in Fife schools to develop inclusive educational approaches for Gypsy/Traveller pupils. The case study also describes the positive implications of their diverse cultural awareness raising work for all pupils and school staff.

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We welcome comments and suggestions from schools and teachers.

Changing Times

Times are changing. Seven years ago, the role of the Traveller Teacher was very different from today. With a mound of resources spilling out of the boot of our cars we would drive from school to school, where the expectation was that we would give individual pupils 'remedial' support.

Now we are aware that if Traveller pupils are to be fully included in mainstream schools, a Traveller Teacher's role is as much about breaking down barriers of prejudice and racism as about teaching basic literacy and numeracy. We need to equip teachers with knowledge of Traveller ways, and support them by developing inclusive and transferable strategies for Traveller pupils.

Travellers' perceptions are changing too. Seven years ago, many of the Traveller parents had never been to school, or had attended for only a short time. Their memories of school were of classrooms very different to those that their children would enter today. Now many parents value school based education for their children.

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Opening Doors

Whilst some Traveller pupils regularly attend school and make good progress, in many cases a Traveller pupil's decision to go to school can take everybody concerned out of their comfort zone.

Parents may:

- have experienced racism in mainstream culture and want to protect their children
- be worried about entrusting their child into an unfamiliar environment
- have had negative school experiences themselves
- be concerned about bullying
- be anxious about admitting their own low levels of literacy
- feel that the curriculum threatens their culture.

In a Traveller community, negotiation skills are highly prized, but these skills do not transfer easily to schools' expectations; when a traveller pupil offers 101 reasons for not doing a particular page of Nelson Grammar, a teacher may see such a response as uncooperative or confrontational.

Pupils may:

- be confused by the different behavioural expectations of the school environment
- be ashamed to admit that they cannot read and write when their peers can
- feel that they have to hide their cultural identity in order to be accepted
- fear bullying, racism or social isolation.

Teachers may feel:

- they lack knowledge about Traveller cultures and lifestyles
- that an insecure pupil, needing an individualised programme may put excessive demands on their time
- challenged by teaching basic literacy and numeracy skills to older pupils
- unsure how to prepare the class for a new arrival
- challenged by culturally different behaviour
- difficulty in communicating effectively with parents who may not be able to read, and may not attend school meetings
- uncertain about dealing with any racism which may emerge within the school community.

Catalyst for Change

As our team worked to raise awareness on all sides, we were handed a powerful tool; [The Race Relations Amendment Act, 2000](#). Schools are now required to take a proactive approach in promoting race equality. Where previous offers of In-Service training had been politely turned down because Educating for Race Equality was not highlighted on a schools' development plans, suddenly we became inundated with requests for support.

Fife Council's Strategic Plan also required all schools to attend [Care and Welfare](#) training in the sensitive issues of domestic violence, child abuse and tackling racism. These were aimed at *all* school staff, not just teachers. Often it will be playground supervisors or office staff who will observe an incident, or be a child's first point of contact when an event occurs.

As participant facilitators, we were shocked to discover some expressions of overt or thinly disguised racism at every level of the school community. *However*, we were made aware of some excellent practice, and were approached by many schools for support in getting started.

This training opportunity enabled us to raise the profile of the issues surrounding Travellers in all schools across Fife, not just those with Traveller pupils on their roll.

Supportive Strategies

While our approach emphasises that *each individual teacher and each individual school has responsibility for every pupil and for tackling racism*, we offer,

- Collaborative Practice
- Tried and tested resources
- Support to plan and embed Race Equality in the Curriculum
- Modelled approaches
- Strategies for engaging Traveller families
- Mentoring ideas.

Opening the Can of Worms...

During Care and Welfare training, some teachers had admitted to us that they were afraid to tackle anti-racist education for *fear of making things worse*. This was particularly the case if there was an isolated child from a minority ethnic background in the class.

Softly Softly... How we carried our work forward

At School A, the Head Teacher recognised that tension between some Traveller pupils and other pupils within the school was part of a wider picture of prejudice and racism within the community. She approached a member of the Traveller Education team for support. We worked for 4 one-hour sessions with each of three Primary six and seven classes.

It would have been inappropriate to launch into tackling racism without first establishing a relationship with the three classes and their teachers. We set simple ground rules for discussion.

- Listen to others - even if you don't agree with them
- No put downs
- You don't have to speak if you don't want to
- It's OK to be unsure - ask questions!

The first session was fun and practical and centred on engaging games, which encouraged pupils to work with class members outside their friendship group. We explored individual characteristics, likes and dislikes, the way we can resemble a person in one way and be completely dissimilar in another. We concluded that while genes decide part of what makes each person unique and special, other aspects of their character can be influenced by those around them.

Girls can't play football!

In Fife we found that all the old stereotypes surrounding gender, race, religion, age and disability were alive and well. Time spent understanding how our opinions are formed helped children understand the basis of discrimination in our society. Already children were beginning to say, "*That's not fair*".

A pretty bad day so far!

Pupils have a clear idea of what constitutes racism. We asked them to think of ways to make an imaginary child from a minority ethnic background miserable. They quickly provided a horrific catalogue of actions, all of which would be recordable on a racist incident monitoring form. This led into a discussion about the consequences of racist behaviour, and that pupils can report behaviour that they find unacceptable.

"We didn't mean to be racist..."

We observed that pupils and adults alike were often unsure about which words were racist and which words were acceptable. We used a website, www.britkid.org which gives excellent and accessible information, as well as other classroom activities for older pupils. Even so, we found that we had to encourage pupils to practise saying the correct words.

Two other excellent resources, a video called [Throwing Stones](#) and a [Karzouche](#) software programme called [Relationships](#) provided concrete scenarios to discuss and develop. These gave children a realistic, but safe, environment to explore the effects of racist behaviour and the possible responses and their consequences. Children were asked to consider the *personal safety* implications of any decision that they made and the adults they could turn to for support.

Maintaining Momentum

The class took the topic seriously. A pupil said she had “*learned not to be racist because it hurts people and that she should treat everybody the same*”. Importantly, four sessions alone are not likely to have changed the attitudes of all pupils ... but it did get them thinking! Current P7 pupils are about to take on a mentoring role within the school. They will buddy P5 pupils in learning to use Kar2ouche software and show their Kar2ouche storyboards as a way of sharing their knowledge about racism. It is hoped that this approach will encourage these P7 pupils to take ownership of the attitudes being shared and help development of a positive school ethos.

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Expanding horizons



Peer Support



Getting to grips with movie-making

Raising Awareness

With a Traveller site due to open in its catchment area, School B was determined to welcome its new pupils sensitively.

Tackling the Playground

While staff attitudes were positive and welcoming to Traveller pupils, there were sometimes fights in the playground. The P4 class topic, Our Community, provided staff with the opportunity to raise pupils' awareness of Traveller issues.

Traveller Education worked alongside Save the Children, who brought a group of teenagers from the Young Roots Project to meet the class. Face to face contact with the teenage Travellers was invaluable in breaking down barriers. Pupils were surprised that they weren't wearing Gypsy skirts, shawls and huge earrings – just jeans and t-shirts. The teenagers led workshops, which fired pupils with enthusiasm and left many children envious of their lifestyle. An exchange between a pupil and a Traveller boy revealed pupils' misconceptions about Travellers.

*P4: So how do you get your food?
TT: ... (bewildered expression) ... We go to ASDA
P4: (Confused)... I thought you ate rabbits!*

In the follow-up session, pupils were taught to make paper flowers, which were taken home proudly. The teacher set homework, which was designed to share with parents what the children had learned about Travellers in their community. This celebration of Traveller culture gave a strong message that the school welcomed the richness that Travellers contributed to the classroom.



Changing Perceptions

Curriculum and Assessment

A child with a high level of ability, but a low level of literacy may pose particular challenges. Staff may need help to obtain age-appropriate materials and be aware that a P7 Traveller pupil may reject P1 resources as being too babyish; “All I ever get is colouring in!”

Placing them in a low ability group, which would progress at a much slower rate, is not appropriate. Our department’s work would often include supporting staff in understanding that, if a pupil was behind their classmates in attainment, this was due to a **lack of prior learning or interrupted learning** and not necessarily to learning difficulties. Often pupils would make astounding progress in short periods of time.

The standard forms of assessment used in school may give little information about a Traveller child’s ability and should be used with extreme caution. Traveller children often have enough **life experience** to sit Level A maths without having seen a graph or a Heinemann textbook! The child that cannot recognise or write number symbols within 5 may well be able to perform mental calculations within 100 orally!

Careful thought needs to be given to the assessment of Traveller pupils who may possess skills not normally valued by the 5-14 curriculum. The teacher, who commented, “This child can do *nothing*” had overlooked his ability to do 119 ‘keepie-uppies’ with his football.

Assessment is for Learning- Project 10

In consultation with the Traveller Education Service, Schools B and C took the opportunity to participate in this project to find ways to:

- overcome any difficulties posed by low levels of parental literacy
- study mismatches between the value given to pupils’ skills by the school and by parents.
- record school experiences that are sometimes difficult to put into words.

Schools’ attempts to explore the meanings of flexible consultation showed it depended on its *setting*. A local nursery provided an informal and friendly environment where pre-school children could play while their mothers talked. Consultation also involved a high level of listening by teachers, which raised their awareness of parents’ experiences of how things were done ‘in their day’.

In School B, for example, staff realised that parents had little knowledge of what their children were doing all day. A video was shown, highlighting the children in the course of a normal school day. The whole mood of the meeting changed. The mothers were tangibly relieved to see their child enjoying drama, chatting with friends in the dining room, answering questions confidently in the classroom.

One mother then admitted:

“What we really want to know is how they are getting on in the playground, do the other children talk to them, have they got friends? and things like that.”

At School C a video element was introduced into an existing Personal Learning Plan, which could be shared with parents who may have limited literacy. Consultation with parents confirmed that this format would be welcome. The development implications for the school went beyond initial work implications

It sounds corny to say it was worth all the effort, but in fact this was so true. If a highly mobile Traveller family returned to Fife “... to get the filming done...” then the process was valued. We can only guess at the reaction of subsequent schools when they receive a video as a record of achievement!

Positive Outcomes for all Pupils

Currently there is an upward trend in school attendance, with some Traveller pupils going on to attend secondary school. Parents clearly value the literacy and numeracy skills that their children gain, but remain apprehensive about the school environment.

The very user-friendly guide, developed by Traveller teachers and produced by STEP, about what to do if bullying occurs, is a great resource for sitting down and talking through such issues with new pupils and parents. Traveller parents welcomed our acknowledgement that their child may encounter racist behaviour in school. Parents feel that they will be listened to if they make a complaint and are less likely to protect their children by ‘moving on’.

School staff now recognise that having an ethos that welcomes and respects diversity and where racism is not tolerated provides an environment in which all pupils, including Traveller pupils can enjoy their right to education.