



I HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS I

Inclusive Educational Approaches - Gypsy/Traveller Pupils and their Families

# Case Studies

A PRIMARY SCHOOL'S INCLUSIVE RESPONSE

## Setting The Scene

Beauly School is a village primary school in the Highlands, with a pupil population of around 140, which includes a nursery class for 4-year-olds. Our pupils are usually taught in composite classes. A playgroup for the younger children also meets in a room at the school.

Gypsy/Travellers visit the area on a regular basis, with many staying on a caravan site on the outskirts of the village. Numbers of children vary from 4 upwards, depending on family commitments. For the last 2 years we have had 5 or 6 pupils, from 2 or 3 families but previous to that we could sometimes be enrolling 10-12 pupils from 5 or 6 families. Gypsy/Traveller families ensure that their children attend school and anecdotal evidence suggests that the children enjoy returning to a known situation and the friends they have made in earlier visits. A Gypsy/Traveller child recently said, "I like working in a group with friends from before", which illustrated his sense of continuity in coming to this school.

"I like working in a group with friends from before"

This case study describes how previous headteacher, Helen Sharp, and present staff of Beauly Primary School have worked with Highland Council's Development Officer, Karen MacMaster, to develop inclusive educational approaches for all their pupils, including their Gypsy and Traveller pupils.

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We welcome comments and suggestions from schools and teachers.



Beauly Primary School

## Arriving on a Monday morning

In the past, Gypsy/Traveller families usually arrived at the office door on a Monday, just before we were all going into class. It was normally late August and late March. Families did not always all arrive or all leave on the same day. When organising classes in June, each year we had to remember to make allowances for any Gypsy/Traveller children who might arrive in the new session. We did not know exactly when to expect our Gypsy/Traveller children. We were never certain of the numbers of children who might arrive, or know about the individual learning needs of each Traveller pupil. While we made general preparations for families' arrivals, inevitably some extra work was generated, which demanded immediate attention because the families only stayed for a short time.

The school only had clerical assistance for a few hours in a week and the head teacher management time was one day a week, increasing later to two days. This meant that any settling-in support for the families and children was minimal. Often at the request of the parents, only a minimum amount of detail was recorded on their enrolment forms. Such limited information made it difficult for Beauly staff to pass a pupil's report on to the next school that a Traveller child attended.

These patterns of arrival and departure, which reflect Gypsy/Traveller travelling culture, continue to this day.

## A Separate Building - where Travellers Used To Learn

In the past Gypsy/Traveller children were accommodated in a room by themselves in a building little used, at that point, by the school in general. A teacher was employed for the duration of their stay. The opportunities for a 'them' and 'us' culture and therefore fighting and bullying were obvious.



Exclusive Classrooms

The situation raised many questions, particularly in the light of the increasing emphasis of inclusion. Changes had to be made!

## Changing School Practices

The school's practice of segregating Gypsy/Traveller children from the local children for class contact time ended in 1993, a change welcomed by teachers.

The size of the pupil population in the school meant that children were usually taught in composite classes, but, very often, these

classes were already approaching the maximum number. Nevertheless, Traveller children were put into their peer class.

School staff and the Traveller families gradually built up positive relationships. Life was more difficult in the initial stages of becoming familiar with each other, with everyone feeling some uncertainty and fear of the unknown. The teachers knew local children very well and gradually got to know the Traveller children who attended regularly.

Changes appeared slowly. Some local children would ask their teachers when one of the Traveller children, who had previously been in the class, would be returning.

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Some Traveller families and their children who attended the school each year were anxious to know that they would be put into the same class with the friends they had made on their last visit! Others were new to the school and the village and it must have been a daunting prospect for them to enter a new class.

## Inclusion into the community

Although staff welcomed the end of segregation, there were also a number of concerns raised at this stage. There were many issues surrounding the arrival of the families on the caravan site near the village, not least community issues. Some local people were not sympathetic to the travelling culture. How would the local children and families feel about some of the proposed changes in the school?

Would the local children be disadvantaged by the arrival of more children into the classes? How would the Traveller Children and their families feel? What would it be like for them to be in a class all day with children they had previously met only in the playground? How would the teachers feel? How could they integrate children whose learning was interrupted? Was the ethos of the school sufficiently welcoming and inclusive? However, with the general acceptance among the school staff that inclusion was the way forward, we worked hard to support all the children and families.

## Interrupted Learning

Gypsy/Traveller children's learning is generally interrupted. Some children might not have attended school since their last visit. During their stay, their patterns of attendance could be irregular, although this was not always the case. It was always a delight to see a child returning year after year and, with tremendous support from parents, keeping up with the work of the class.

We kept a folder for each child, containing samples of the work completed during their time at the school. This was useful as a starting point on each return visit. But, there were more questions. Had the child attended school elsewhere between the visits? If so, what progress had been made? It was not always easy to access information and to ensure progression.

A lack of knowledge about individual pupils persisted as records were not kept up to date. Children returned with little or no curricular background information. It was time consuming for class teachers to find out what a Traveller child could do in the different curricular areas. Access to support was not easily achieved. Existing support in the school was frequently diverted to help both Gypsy/Traveller children and their teachers.

To help children overcome the gaps in their learning they needed support and, importantly, so did the school staff. Staff needed to know about the travelling culture. What kinds of support for learning would Traveller children need?

## Highland's development of inclusive approaches for Gypsy/Traveller pupils

Three years ago, Highland Council appointed a Development Officer to develop educational provision for Gypsy/Traveller children and families across the authority's schools. The Development Officer has been able to support schools with a quick assessment of a Traveller child's progress and provide class teachers with a summary of where to start in terms of literacy and numeracy.

It is relatively easy for the Development Officer to do this as she has generally had contact with the children as they move from one class to another, either within a school or between schools.

Recent guidance posted to all schools has noted that, 'For Gypsies and Travellers there is a constant tension between maintaining their lifestyles and cultures and participating fully in public education' (*Inclusive Educational Approaches for Gypsies and Travellers within the context of interrupted Learning. Learning and Teaching Scotland 2003*). The school system still offers many barriers to the inclusion of Gypsy/Travellers, the most common being the issues of literacy for adults in relating to and with the school – enrolment forms, absence notes, written home-school communication and reliance on parental literacy to support homework.

Other barriers include the curriculum itself and its relevance for Traveller communities. The school calendar year and the travelling calendar do not always coincide. Making appointments to see school staff does not always fit in with work and family patterns of Traveller families.

However, we now realise more clearly that there are other constraints in working with Gypsy/Traveller families. When we meet a family for the first time we do not really know how long we have to take things forward – initial work with the family is very important. We can, therefore be working with a constantly changing client group and have to be flexible, as there will often be a change in focus depending on the needs of a group or family.

### Developing positive relationships - in and out of school

Staff have worked hard to support and encourage all the children through our new inclusive strategies, "We want them to come to school and feel welcome, without a focus on them." The key to success in this situation, as in countless others, has been the building of good relationships and the development of confidence and mutual trust between all members of a school community, whether full or part-time.

Gypsy/Traveller families are supporting and attending the local playgroup and nursery with the children attending regularly when they are in the area. This allows the time for relationships to be built up with families who have children of a young age, so that the school is perceived as a more welcoming place. As Traveller parents saw their child/children achieving some progress, school-based learning seemed to take on greater importance to them. An example of this was highlighted to staff when both local parents and Traveller parents attended a meeting for all parents on the teaching of reading in the early stages.

We have recognised the vital need for a key contact person within the school and a contact person within the authority in making things work. Gaining and maintaining trust and building and developing relationships with individuals within the community are also vital in making progress to support the children's education. Working in partnership with Gypsy/Traveller children, families and other professionals has been key to all the progress made.

**"We want them to come to school and feel welcome, without a focus on them."**

### Strategies for Inclusion

Co-ordination of arrangements to support access to educational provision through the identification of pupils' learning needs has allowed strategies to be put in place in a number of schools where Gypsy/Traveller families and school staff are now helped to support Gypsy/Traveller pupils access the curriculum.

*Transfer records* - Once a Development Officer for Traveller Children was appointed, thought was given to improving record keeping. A new form of transfer record was produced, one which could be taken by Traveller families from school to school. The new transfer record, which details the work covered whilst a child was attending at Beauuly, has been developed for use by families. The school keeps a copy and sends a copy with the family to take to the next school. The record brings more up-to-date information to the next school, which makes it easier for everybody - children and staff

It has proved reasonably successful and feedback has highlighted that Traveller parents like it because their child is able to start work immediately, without being re-assessed at each school. Teachers like it for the same reason – they receive immediate curricular information about a child's progress. Travellers do not generally say when they are leaving and where they are going, for their own personal reasons, but parents have been encouraged to do so in the interests of the child to allow teachers to get the records written up and this appears to be working successfully. Parents have been encouraged to see the importance of supporting this transfer record as it helps them get a picture of their own child's learning.

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*Teaching resources* - To assist staff in teaching and developing cultural links with the children specific resources are highlighted and allocated to the school as necessary. There are a variety of literary resources published by Traveller Education Services in England, which can be used with the whole class to develop an understanding and raise awareness of Gypsy/Traveller culture. *Just Like You* produced by Haringey Traveller Education Services, 1998, and *My Wonderful Place, The Story of a journey to Appleby Fair*, produced by London Borough of Hillingdon Traveller Education Service, are two very good examples of stories that can be used with children to encourage awareness.

Staff have also found cultural information packs useful, in highlighting some of the cultural differences and possible implications for staff working with Traveller families. This pack itself was put together with the assistance of staff in the school and in consultation with the families themselves.

*Funding support staff* - More recently money has been allocated to the school to employ an auxiliary to support staff and children. Although we see this as a positive move, in practice, finding appropriate staff has proved to be very difficult. Somebody in the school has to be re-deployed while the Traveller Children are in the school. While we continue to look at existing support and budgets creatively, key practical questions need to be addressed. How can we find somebody to take up a post immediately? Traveller children are likely to have moved on by the time a post is advertised and an appointment is made. Also, Disclosure Scotland procedures take time to process.

*Play Inclusive* - Last session Beaulieu Primary was involved in the pilot of Play Inclusive, which was a “two year Action Research project looking at the ways in which play supported inclusion in schools”. Beaulieu used the opportunity to focus on developing inclusive play with a number of children who needed the playground and playtime to be a more positive place. Some Gypsy/Traveller children were part of the target group.

A lot of initial planning in terms of appropriate resources and activities took place. Cardboard boxes and hoops were set out in the playground and music was played out of the windows. Once underway staff and pupils commented on its positive effect. “All the children seemed to benefit. We noticed the enjoyment of normally ‘quiet’ children who came out of themselves and were happier”. As is the nature of the Traveller community, all the families had moved away before the pilot actually finished, but they were involved in the planning stages with the other children in the school.

The findings have been made into a pack, which has been distributed to all schools in Scotland.



Inclusive Playtime

## The Future?

There have been fewer Traveller children attending the school of late and they have spent a shorter time in the area. It appears to be a trend at present, throughout Scotland. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Gypsy/Travellers who used to travel in the Highland area are now following a more settled way of life whereby they are basing themselves in a house during the winter months and travelling only in the summer. The summer is of course when the schools are on holiday. It also seems that work opportunities for families are presently being sought elsewhere. However, we have to keep in mind that these situations may change again.

The more inclusive strategies appear to be effective. Staff include Traveller children in all the activities in which the local children have been involved. One Traveller child attended after school and Saturday morning football practices and games.

The Development Officer meets Gypsy/Traveller children in various schools and in conversations with a number of Traveller children, several of them have told her that they like going to Beaulieu School. They feel happy when they meet their friends from their previous visits and settle back in quickly. “It makes me happy (coming to Beaulieu) because I like the work and I like the children because they are friendly....”, said one child. Children from a smaller local school and one of the Traveller children were part of Beaulieu’s first Nursery Class and the children in that class are now in P.7.



Inclusive Beginnings

They have been talking about the possibility of having a reunion. When should the reunion be? The local children were excited to be shown a quilt made while they were in Nursery, with a pattern based on their handprints. Will that particular Traveller child be back next session? The family have been contacted and will be invited to attend the reunion.

Another child in the same family was disappointed that a reunion was not being held for the class he was in. His positive statement supports inclusion and is a ‘pat on the back’ for the staff in Beaulieu Primary that he wants to return! In times past a Traveller child might not have remembered his primary school days as happy days. He said that, “it would have been nice to see everyone - and all the teachers - again”.