Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

www.cymru.gov.uk

Gypsy and Traveller Education: Engaging Families - A Research Report

Executive Summary
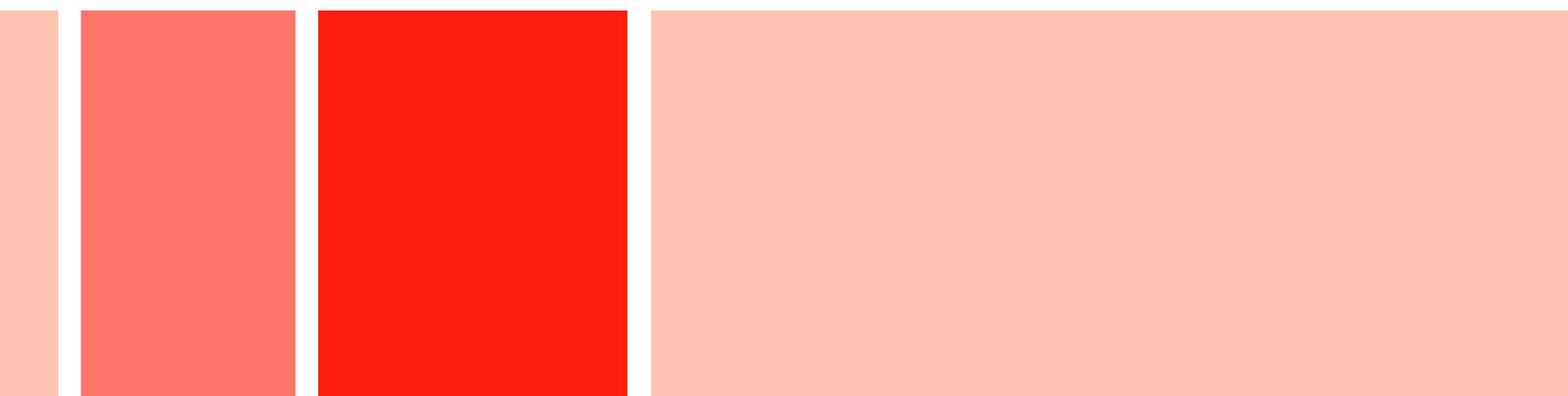
Gypsy and Traveller Education: Engaging Gypsy and Traveller Families - A Research Report

Amber Fensham-Smith

Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

Table of contents

Glossary of terms

CSI - Core Subjects Indicator (English, Maths and Science)

ESW - Education Social Worker

EWO - Education Welfare Officer

FPI - Foundation Phase Indicator

GRT - Gypsy, Roma and Traveller

LA - Local Authority

NPD - National Pupil Database

PLASC - Pupil Level Annual Schools Census

SEN - Special Educational Needs

Site - An area of land used for Gypsy and Traveller Caravans. Authorised sites have planning permission, while unauthorised sites do not

TES - Traveller Education Service

Context

1. Gypsy and Travellers are considered one of the most marginalised and socially excluded groups in England and Wales[1]. Consequently, Gypsy and Travellers are likely to experience poor outcomes including low qualifications, high levels of unemployment, inadequate access to housing and poor health[2]. Historically, a lack of cultural recognition and public understanding has further perpetuated the stigmatisation and segregation of this group[3].

2. Education is a subject of debate within Travelling communities and many Gypsy and Traveller young people leave school before the end of statutory school education.

3. Consequently, Gypsy and Travellers pupils have the highest levels of absenteeism at both Primary and Secondary school, are the lowest achieving group and thus feature disproportionally in exclusion figures.

4. Although there has been some improvement, rates of attendance and attainment for Gypsy and Traveller children remain unacceptably low. Of primary importance is the need to increase the attendance of Gypsy and Traveller pupils. Only by achieving this will improved educational attainment be possible.

5. A range of factors impact on pupil attendance, central to which is the often negative perceptions of school life held by Gypsy and Traveller families. These are embedded within distinct sets of cultural values that intersect at different points in education. Additional barriers connected to

---

[1] Estyn 2011 'The education of Gypsy Traveller pupils: An update on provision in secondary schools', March 2011. Cardiff: Estyn publications.
[2] Wilkin, A., Derrington, C. and Foster, B. (2009) *Improving the Outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Pupils: Literature review* (DCSF Research Report RR077). London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.
[3] Welsh Government (2008a) *Moving Forward- Gypsy and Traveller Education*, [Guidance Circular: 003/2008] Cardiff: Welsh Government.

access, inclusion, social integration and safety also adversely affect attendance.

6. Changing negative perceptions is central to increasing attendance; transfer rates to Secondary school; retention in Secondary education and, ultimately, attainment. To understand the ways in which these barriers can be minimised requires detailed and up-to-date accounts of good practice in engaging families across Wales.

Aims and Objectives

6. This research aimed to identify and present detailed accounts of what works in engaging Gypsy and Traveller families in education with a specific focus on attainment, attendance, transition and retention. The objective was to gain a deeper understanding of the issues, and to identify practical approaches and solutions that would be of benefit to service providers, policy makers and Gypsy and Traveller families.

Methods

7. The research used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods including:

i) A systematic search and review of recent literature

ii) An online survey of Local Authority provision (LAs), and

iii) An in-depth interviews with Traveller Education Service (TES) workers in four LAs. The information generated by the interviews was analysed thematically. Examples of successful practice were used to illuminate key themes throughout.

Research findings

8. The majority of Gypsy and Traveller pupils were in mainstream education but some received alternative support on school premises in classrooms/meeting rooms. Close links were made with a variety of other service providers for activities; ranging from settling children into Primary school to delivering specific transition projects which helped to secure transition and successfully attendance at Secondary school.

9. The research identified distinct practices, key factors and ways of working which helped to promote attainment, increase attendance and facilitate successful transfer, retention and re-engagement. It is apparent that engaging Gypsy and Traveller families with education requires a holistic approach led by TESs collaborating and working strategically with other agencies and teachers in implementing and delivering support. In particular, the research identified the importance of both pastoral and academic support for these learners and their families at a number of stages in their school careers.

10. In some instances, pupils were withdrawn from school by their parents for Elective Home Education (EHE). This was a particular challenge for TES staff, and one that had only emerged in recent years. TES staff had concerns about the growth in EHE; particularly the extent to which these pupils were receiving an education suitable to their age, ability, aptitude and needs. TES staff were concerned that the majority of Gypsy and Traveller parents who had opted into EHE did not have the support or resources required to deliver an efficient and suitable education. Some TES workers raised concerns around issues related to EHE and safeguarding. In these situations, the absence of official guidance made the process of re-engaging pupils increasingly difficult.

11. The survey suggested a lack of consistency in the way LAs collect, manage and retrieve attainment and attendance data for the Gypsy and Traveller pupils they support. This has implications for the monitoring of support provided and the understanding of how effective it is.

12. The research identified the importance of:
    • Establishing and maintaining the trust of families and the community
    • Effective monitoring of attainment and attendance
    • Providing tailored academic and pastoral support in schools on a 'needs basis'

- Ongoing out-reach work as part of a 'whole family' model of support, and
- Re-engaging families.

Areas for further potential action

Traveller Education Services:

1. To track the outcomes of the support they provide to families
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of this support in improving attainment and attendance
3. To develop an evidence-based understanding of effective practice and successful outcomes for engaging with families.

Schools:

4. To fulfil their role in working with families and in facilitating attendance, transition, retention and re-engagement
5. To work closely with the TES and other services in implementing and delivering academic and pastoral support for Gypsy and Traveller pupils

Local Authorities:

6. To improve and develop centralised systems for collecting, storing, retrieving and analysing attainment and attendance data across LAs
7. To continue to maintain discrete TESs and levels of support for this vulnerable learner group.