Case study: Gypsy, Roma and Traveller achievement

Curriculum links with the local community
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This case study shows how reviewing the way in which the curriculum was organised and taught provided opportunities to strengthen links with the local Traveller community.
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Background
A North East primary school has always had some Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children on its roll as it is situated close to the nearby local authority Traveller site; the children making up to 3.5% of the school population. Some of the children travel during the summer months and the ethnicities of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are known to most of the school.

Key factors that motivated the intervention
However, while auditing the school’s responses to work with this particular group of children, it became obvious that very little was known about their lifestyle and few children or adults, including staff, had been to the local site. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture was not represented in the curriculum.

Links with parents were good and had been built up over many years. For example, teachers were aware that some families required information verbally due to restricted literacy skills and made a conscious effort to ensure information was relayed to all parents. However these links with parents needed to impact more on learning and teaching.

A whole-school policy decision was taken to change the way the curriculum was organised and taught from the previous approach, based around tightly-described study units, to a more creative curriculum. This gave staff the chance to identify opportunities to reflect Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture within the whole-school curriculum. It also provided the opportunity to improve on the links with the local community and how those links were manifested in the curriculum.

The action taken
The school identified a named Gypsy, Roma and Traveller curriculum coordinator.

To begin with, all staff, including teachers, teaching assistants, lunchtime supervisors, office staff and the caretaker, received training about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture from the local Traveller Education Support Service (TESS). The first stage to be adapted was the Early Years Foundation Stage. Resources that reflected the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller lifestyle were incorporated into areas of learning and a female Gypsy, Roma and Traveller persona doll was successfully used to draw children’s attention to some of the negative issues which had previously arisen in class.

During this first cycle of the new curriculum, a role-play ‘Hobby’ (a trailer caravan) was brought into the Year 1 classroom when the children were learning about homes. This was an exciting addition to the classroom and curriculum. This study unit was further developed to include a class visit to the local site, accompanied by the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children as guides. Also, the loan of a vardo (a traditional horse-drawn wagon used by Gypsies), placed in the school grounds, further developed all children’s understanding of the rich cultural tradition that was ‘on the door step’ of the community.

The GRT coordinator visited the school’s families on site to discuss any issues they felt they had with their children’s education and how their progress could be further developed both at home and when they travel. Responses to the consultation were two-fold:
- the school began to provide the families with a home–school support package to demonstrate ways in which their children can be supported while on site;
- individual packages were developed, with the support of the TESS, for the children’s periods of travel during the summer months.
Outcomes

The outcomes for the school from this change in approach to the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children have been very marked.

- Home and school links have been dramatically strengthened.
- The curriculum has been enhanced for all pupils and this will continue to be built upon in forthcoming years; ensuring, for example, that the visit to the local site continues to be on offer to all Year 1 children.
- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children's self-esteem rose regarding their own culture within the local community.
- Educational support from home has strengthened.
- Individualised learning packs will be developed and used for a variety of pupils throughout the school.