



## Irish Traveller Movement in Britain

The Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Road, London N7 6PA

Tel: 020 7607 2002 Fax: 020 7607 2005

[www.irishtraveller.org](http://www.irishtraveller.org)  
[policy@irishtraveller.org.uk](mailto:policy@irishtraveller.org.uk)

### Submission to the Children's Commissioner's School Exclusion Inquiry



### Gypsy and Traveller School Exclusion

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# Introduction

The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain (ITMB) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Children's Commissioner's School Exclusions Inquiry. As the Commissioner is well aware, Gypsy and Traveller pupils are the lowest achieving group in schools in England and are approximately three to five times more likely to be excluded from school.<sup>1</sup> These poor outcomes are not just limited to education, but are also present in areas such as health, child poverty and economic inclusion.<sup>2</sup> Addressing the high incidence of Gypsy and Traveller school exclusions is a key factor in tackling the broader inequalities experienced by these communities.

## Methodology

This submission will focus on evidence from 5 qualitative interviews conducted with members of the ITMB Irish Traveller Advisory Group. Interviewees include a Traveller Teaching Assistants, a Traveller Parent Ambassador, an Education Consultant and two parents. All interviewees experienced the direct or indirect exclusion of their children or children they worked with from school.

The objective of this research is to ensure that Travellers voices are heard in the Commissioners inquiry. ITMB regrets, due to limitations in time and resources, we were unable to interview a sample of Traveller children for this report.

## 1. Experience of school exclusion

Interviewees described a number of different experiences and reasons why their children or Traveller children they worked with are often excluded. Parents described removing their children from school due to racist bullying. In such cases interviewees considered this a form of indirect exclusion due to the school not effectively addressing racist bullying. Worryingly, racist bullying was a common issue raised by all interviewees which contributed to exclusions. Closely linked with this was a feeling by interviewees that many schools weren't willing to engage with Travellers to better understand their culture and to enable them to better understand school policies and procedures.

### Racist bullying

Interviewee 1, an Education Consultant, experienced the exclusion of her cousins from school as the result of reacting to being bullied by other pupils:

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<sup>1</sup> Dept. of Education 2009, *Permanent and fixed period exclusion from schools and exclusion appeals in England 2007/08*, p.37-41  
[http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000860/SFR18\\_2009\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000860/SFR18_2009_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> EHRC 2009, *Inequalities experienced by Gypsy and Traveller Communities*, Cemlyn, Greenfields, Burnett, Matthew and Whitfield for the Equality and Human Rights Commission, particularly pages 5-34  
[http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded\\_files/research/12inequalities\\_experienced\\_by\\_gypsy\\_and\\_traveller\\_communities\\_a\\_review.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/research/12inequalities_experienced_by_gypsy_and_traveller_communities_a_review.pdf)

*Yes, my cousins. All were bullied by other children but then lashed out, the police were involved. Bodyguards were put on her classroom where she was in isolation (Interviewee 1)*

Interviewee 2, a Traveller Teaching Assistant, experienced both the exclusion of her son and the exclusion of children she worked:

*My son was excluded in secondary school, because he had special needs, not because he was a Traveller. A new Headmaster took over and cut the support for special needs children. They said they couldn't have my son disrupting the lessons*

*I worked with a young Traveller boy in secondary school who got into fights because other pupils wound him up during lunchtime. He had to go home at lunchtime everyday, they said he couldn't cope (Interviewee 2)*

Interviewee 3 had not experienced the direct exclusion of her son from school, but instead had experienced indirect exclusion having to remove her children due to racist bullying:

*I haven't had any children excluded from school but I have taken my children out of school because of bullying. The primary school was fine, the problems started in secondary school. My son had a lot of bullying in secondary: they tried to hang him with his own tie; two boys from year ten, and my son was in year seven. They held his head down the toilette and flushed it. They nicknamed '..... the Pikey' and half the school talked to him like that. The only punishment any of the bullies ever received was to write two letters of apology to me, his mother, and they didn't even write it to him. My son told me that the teachers always sided against him. Some teachers referred to him living on green belt land (Interviewee 3)*

Interviewee 4 shared a similar experience, being forced to remove four of her seven children from school because of name calling and bullying:

*I put seven children through the school system and took four of them out because of name calling and bullying. Teachers always seem to think it's the Travellers child's fault My daughter came home crying everyday from school. I went in to the school, met the deputy head and we told them that I wanted my child to have an education but she wasn't going to learn in a school where she was getting bullied (Interviewee 4)*

The same interviewee had also experienced the direct exclusion of her son from primary school for fighting:

*I have had a son excluded from primary school. They said he was fighting and that he hit a boy in the play ground. He got a temporary one week exclusion. He went back after that and finished primary school. I think it was an ongoing problem between him and another boy in the school, the difference was my son did it in front of the teachers and the other boy did it without being seen*

*Teachers called me and I tried to explain to them that Traveller children are taught that if somebody hits you, you hit them back. Children can't understand why they are told at*

*home to defend themselves and at school they can't leading to Traveller children getting confused. (Interviewee 4)*

It is evident from these interviews that racist bullying and cultural misunderstanding of Gypsy and Traveller pupils has a large part to play in both direct and indirect exclusions. The ITMB 2010 report *Roads to Success: Economic and Social Inclusion for Gypsies and Travellers* found that 55 per cent of Gypsy and Irish Traveller interviewees experienced bullying and discrimination during their time in education. This figure compares with one third of Black and Asian students who experienced racial discrimination at school, college or university and 1 per cent of white students. The report concluded that racist bullying often acts as a barrier to participation in school with parents often removing children from schools when this occurs.<sup>3</sup>

## **Cultural difference, misunderstanding and school policy**

As referred to by Interviewee 4: cultural and behavioral differences led to her son receiving a one week temporary exclusion from primary school. Such cultural differences combined with bullying and a long history of under-engagement with the education system, are some of the key factors to consider when addressing school exclusions. Interviewee 5, who worked directly with Traveller pupils as a Teaching Assistant and Traveller Parent Ambassador, described how it requires both the school and the Traveller community to take positive steps to address these issues.

*A lot of Travellers have been brought up to think that school is not important, but it is too easy for schools to put them out. Attendance is a big issue with a lack of attendance by Travellers*

*Travellers are more likely to have ADHD and learning difficulties, but are often all labelled as having ADHD when not all do have it. Teachers are often not that interested in understanding and engaging with Traveller children (Interviewee 5)*

As highlighted by the other interviewees, interviewee 5 emphasised how Traveller children's behavior is too often misunderstood by teachers:

*I wouldn't say Travellers are worse behaved than other kids, we are just naturally loud, a bit wild and run free, it's the environment they have been brought up in. I think it's often looked on as bad behaviour, but it is not intentional on the Travellers part. Part of the problem is that schools are not culturally aware of the Irish Traveller community (Interviewee 5)*

Too often such misunderstandings turn into a vicious cycle of incremental punishments leading to teachers and schools coming to loggerheads with Traveller parents and pupils. As a result Traveller pupils often find themselves on a slippery slope towards exclusion through systematic non-cooperation with school policies.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> ITMB 2010, *Roads to Success: Economic and Social Inclusion for Gypsies and Travellers*, executive summary, p. v

[http://www.irishtraveller.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Roads\\_to\\_Success-15-11.pdf](http://www.irishtraveller.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Roads_to_Success-15-11.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See Brian Foster, 2011, notes on Gypsy, Traveller and Roma school exclusions, Appendix A, para. 1

## 2. Post exclusion

### Impact of exclusion and support

Interviewees gave mixed opinions about how Traveller pupils fared following direct or indirect exclusion. Interviewee 1 described the support mechanisms in place and how these could be improved:

*The same (support mechanisms) that are available to all parents through LA partnership with parent support officers who advocate for pupils. Also the director of children's services should advocate for children. It would be good to develop a proforma letter for parents to send in these cases so that it is generic but the individual details can be completed. (Interviewee 1)*

Interviewee 4 gave a pessimistic outlook for Traveller children following exclusion:

*I think a lot of the children are delighted to be excluded because of bullying and name calling. Two of my children have been home educated. Obviously I'd rather they were in school where they could get a good education but they get a good education from home. A child is not going to learn anything if they are unhappy in school (Interviewee 4)*

Interviewee 2 agreed that support for excluded pupils was inadequate or in some cases non-existent, however, disagreed that home education was an effective alternative to school:

*There isn't, I don't know of any support. I totally disagree with home tuition, children need to be in school to learn properly (Interviewee 2)*

Interviewee 5 talked about the effectiveness of the local support structures in place for excluded pupils:

*A lot of them are referred on to ethnic minority achievement service: the Helix and Harrow achievement service who deal with what happens next. In the Helix they feel comfortable, they are given what they can do, they work on their confidence, they work on their people skills because a lot of them are angry, it's about the confidence building about getting them back into school. It's basically like a half way house. Some go back into mainstream school and some don't (Interviewee 5)*

However, Interviewee 4 found the post exclusion support services in her area inadequate, referring only to the local Traveller Education Service as being supportive:

*The only support you are going to get is if you go and get it yourself. I can read and write and could get the support but other Travellers can't. After I got onto the Traveller Education Service they gave me some support. The TES is more there for keeping the kids in school and most of them is gone now (Interviewee 4)*

Interviewee 4 raises the key issue of Traveller Education Services (TES) being cut by local authorities across England. The extent of the cuts has been evidenced in research by the National Union for Teachers and research conducted in City University.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that nearly half the local authorities in England have either abolished their TES's completely or have drastically reduced the number of front-line staff.<sup>6</sup>

Interviewee 2, a Traveller Teaching Assistant, shared similar concerns about the cuts to TES's, citing the support they provide as being crucial to limiting exclusions:

*The Liaison Officer helps a lot and stopped one Traveller child I work with being excluded fully. If they do away with TES's then there will be no hope for Traveller children (Interviewee 2)*

In response to the question of whether or not Traveller children are set and do homework once excluded, interviewee's gave generally negative responses on both schools and parents conduct:

*No but do parents ask for it if it is not forthcoming (Interviewee 1)*

*I haven't come across excluded children doing homework, but Traveller kids who aren't excluded don't often do their homework (Interviewee 5)*

*Never experienced that, they (schools) never gave homework (Interviewee 2)*

## **Re-entry and the independent appeals process**

Interviewees painted a worrying picture of their experience of Traveller children re-entering school following exclusion:

*They just stay at home and some never come back into school again (Interviewee 1)*

*They lose the trust they had in the school, lose self-esteem and for many of them that's the end of their education (Interviewee 2)*

Interviewee 5 mentioned that 'some go back into mainstream school and some don't', however, like her fellow interviewees she expressed little confidence in the re-entry process. Similarly, Interviewees expressed little confidence in the independent appeal process:

*My family has not used this because it is too complicated and too many barriers. (Interviewee 1)*

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<sup>5</sup> NUT (2010) On-line NUT survey November 2010 (unpublished)

<sup>6</sup> Doherty, M. 2011, City University, *Cuts to Traveller Education Services*  
<http://acert.org.uk/agm-2011-michael-doherty.html>

*A lot wouldn't know anything about it, they would just accept it while a non-Traveller would challenge it (Interviewee 2)*

*A lot of Travellers would look at it like there is no point. A lot of Traveller parents can't read or write and would feel ashamed and embarrassed coming into the school (Interviewee 5)*

### **3. Prevention and models of good practice**

#### **Interviewees' Recommendations**

Interviewees made a number of recommendations on how to effectively address Gypsy and Traveller school exclusions:

*More welcoming schools, Zero tolerance of verbal bullying, Better teaching of basic skills in school, Parents to make formal complaints to governors and the Directors of Children's Services (Interviewee 1)*

*More cultural awareness, more resources and staff who know how to deal with situations (Interviewee 2)*

*When a Traveller child is first going into a school with no knowledge of Traveller children there should be an interview for the Traveller parent to put their views across and for the teachers to let the parents know the school rules. Because you could have Traveller parents who can't read and need the rules to be explained. The same goes for jewellery, uniform and stuff like that (Interviewee 4)*

*Having the parents involved in the schools would help along with cultural awareness by the schools. Better relationships between schools and families. Efforts need to come from both sides, Travellers and schools. A parent ambassador should be an open minded person, I was able to open both sides minds to what's going on. Better communication made the schools better (Interviewee 5)*

#### **Interviewees' examples of good practice**

Interviewees referred to two examples of good practice they had direct experience of:

*The Helix Centre and Harrow tuition service, model of good practice, one on one support for children as well as families, tries to get them back into school (Interviewee 5)*

*My grandchildren attend a very good primary school with a very good head teacher who understands Travellers. Once you let them know when you're going travelling for a few weeks they are willing to keep your child's name in the school and authorise absence. They give you a schoolpack to take with you to keep up with child's education. There are more Travellers in the school now and more Traveller parents willing to send their kids there. It's catholic school. St. Pauls Catholic School, Cheshunt, Hertfordshire. Never heard of an exclusion from the school (Interviewee 4)*

## 4. Conclusion

ITMB consider the high level of Gypsy and Traveller school exclusions unacceptable and are prepared to work with the government, local authorities, schools and the Traveller community to address this issue. The interviews in this submission reveal the extreme frustration felt by many Travellers who experience the exclusion of their children or children they work with. This frustration is particularly acute considering the high levels of racist bullying reported by interviewees. As highlighted in this submission, addressing racist bullying is one of the key steps towards addressing school exclusions.

This submission also reveals that while the exclusion and racist bullying of Gypsy and Traveller children is a widespread matter of concern, there are schools and local authorities who have effectively addressed this issue and seen positive outcomes. As highlighted by one interview, 'better communication made the schools better.' Effective communication and engagement is another key factor raised by all interviewees which provides the foundations to address both exclusion and racist bullying.

## 5. The way forward

- The Children's Commissioner should consider supporting Gypsy and Traveller organisations, national bullying charities and the DFE to establish a national initiative to combat racist/prejudiced based bullying of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils.
- The Children's Commissioner should scrutinise the DFE's pledge take steps to assess the impact of school-based commissioning, alternative provision and early intervention on the most vulnerable pupil groups who experience high levels of school exclusion.
- The DFE, schools and Gypsy and Traveller organisations should ensure Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents are better supported to make formal complaints to School Governors and Directors of Children's Services.
- The Association of Directors of Children's Services should be engaged by Gypsy and Traveller organisations, the Children's Commissioner and DFE to discuss how Directors of Children's Services throughout the regions can better understand and advocate on behalf of Gypsy, Roma, Traveller and vulnerable children who have been excluded.
- The role of Parent Ambassadors for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children (and vulnerable children in general) should be promoted by the DFE and the Children's Commissioner as a means of improving communication between schools and vulnerable families.
- The DFE should ensure that local authorities support and retain the knowledge, trust and expertise built up by Traveller Education Services which has prevented many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children from becoming excluded.



## **Appendix A: Brian Foster, Educational Consultant, note on school exclusions**

1. Schools have incremental punishments: miss homework get a detention, miss detentions get a letter home, letter home has no effect call in parents, parents fail to attend school threatens temporary exclusion, school feels obliged to carry out the exclusion. During this period the pupil and family feel at loggerheads with the school and if anything behaviour and attendance deteriorate. So pupils find themselves on a slippery slope towards exclusion as a result of not cooperating with the schools policies. Schools are frequently frustrated by this inevitable progress towards exclusion, but are unable to find strategies to defuse the situation; children and their families may also find themselves in a similar situation.

2. Racist bullying is reported by a high proportion of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils. Reporting bullying is regarded as "soft", and generally schools find it difficult to intervene effectively unless they have hard evidence. It should also be said that the victims of bullying can also be the perpetrators, and some children find themselves in a hierarchy of bullying. There is a significant difference between schools who regard bullying as normal and those who encourage mutual respect and understanding between all members of the school community.

3. Chris Derrington has described how pupils experience cultural dissonance between their home and community cultures and that of the school, and they can cope in several different ways, summarised as fight, flight and playing white. Each of these strategies tends to lead to the pupil feeling estranged from the school community and on the defensive.

4. There are cultural issues. Most Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are brought up to be able to defend themselves and protect other members of their family and community. If they suffer racial abuse or are threatened they are likely to respond physically. In general they feel a physical response is more likely to prevent future episodes of abuse. Most schools deal more severely with physical violence than with verbal abuse, but Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils frequently tell of "snapping" after a sustained period of verbal abuse from their peers. They are excluded while the taunters receive more minor punishment, in some cases because their taunts are not recognised as racist by staff.

5. Gypsies, Roma and Travellers anticipate that they will be earning a living and starting a family by their late teens. They are treated as adults within the community once they pass puberty. As a result some teachers find they are not sufficiently respectful in how they speak to staff, and conversely some young people object to the way teachers talk to them. to treat each other with respect. DFE research (Improving Outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils (2010) found schools involved in the SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) programme had better relationships between staff and pupils, and this was recognised by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents. SEAL sought to encourage everyone in the school community to treat each other with respect.

6. Where there is a significant number of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in the school, they can begin to act as a group, and staff see them as a group. Groups can conflict

with other groups in the school, and can egg each other on to behave inappropriately. On the other hand, they may begin to feel they are treated differently from other pupils, and feel that they will be blamed whether they are involved or not.