

What are the key social elements that affect a pupil's ability to access education?

Social inclusion and equality are two concepts which have framed the educational infrastructures of England and Wales since the latter end of the twentieth century. In 1985, the Swann Report: Education for All published by the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups in England acknowledged the extreme prejudice and alienation suffered by 'Travellers' children' (Lander, 2011, p.106) and recommended that all children, regardless of race, colour or ethnic origin, should have access to a good education which develops their abilities and aptitudes to the full and brings about a true sense of belonging to Britain (Goepel, Childerhouse and Sharpe, 2014, p.56). These recommendations arguably paved the way for the future reform of the education system in both England and Wales, a reform that was to celebrate inclusivity and educate children to become active citizens of the world (Donaldson, 2015, p.30). With the new, refreshingly inclusive approach of Every Child Matters (2003), the discussions around the topic of inclusive schooling have seen a paradigm shift from an overwhelming concern with the topic of equality to a more open focus on social inclusion and equality of opportunity (Lister, 1998, p.215). The shift to promoting equality of opportunity rather than simply equality is important as it emphasises the need for educators to provide each individual child with opportunities to achieve and flourish which are equally as good an opportunity as are presented to others, showing no favouritism, prejudice or discrimination (Griffin, 2008, p.12).

Furthermore, an important part of educational practice is the celebration of diversity within the school community, a concept which on the surface many institutions are claiming to achieve. The notion of inclusion is definitively the process of identifying, understanding and tackling barriers to participation that individuals face and helping them to achieve a sense of belonging to the community in which they reside (Griffin, 2008, p.17). Providing early years and primary children with the opportunity to develop positive, respectful attitudes towards individuals who differ from themselves, is arguably the most effective approach to reducing the likelihood of the exponential growth of prejudice, stereotypes and unconscious bias within society. However, although the educational institutions in Wales promote the ideals of inclusivity and diversity, evidence of deep-rooted prejudice, stereotyping, direct and indirect discrimination towards the ethnic minority group of Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller families

continues to affect the lives of children in schools (Lander, 2011, p.106). Estyn reported in 2018 that there was not enough being done for Gypsy Traveller pupils outside of assemblies, with mainstream school environments leaving said pupils feeling 'self-conscious' and 'as though we aren't the same as the others' (BBC News, 2019). It is this unconscious prejudice and a history of rejection which arguably presents the greatest barriers to educational access and attainment amongst Traveller children in Wales today.

Gypsy and Traveller people have been debilitated by policy and legislation in England and Wales for centuries. Their arrival in Britain in the sixteenth century was met with suspicion (Lander, 2011, p.100). Practicing traditions such as palm reading and fortune telling, Gypsies were associated with the dark arts and viewed as a threat to Christianity. For this reason, Gypsy and Roma people were viewed with superstition, wrong-doing and distrust; attitudes which unfortunately laid the foundations for the preconceptions that prevail in society today (Lander, 2011, p.100). The magnitude of hostility and inequality faced by individuals of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in Britain is evident in the historical persecution of said communities across Europe, with every modern European country having anti-Gypsy laws at some point (Women and Equalities Committee, 2019). Dating back to the reign of King Henry VIII, it was once a capital offence to be a Gypsy in England. This direct discrimination continued into the twentieth century when an estimated five hundred thousand Roma people were executed under the Nazi regime (Sheffield, 2020). There is a severe underrepresentation of Gypsy people and their heritage in the tales of history and the long-standing hostility and lack of acceptance shown towards them by settled communities contributes to the lack of trust Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families have in establishments and people of authority within the education system.

The aforementioned lack of trust that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families have with people in positions of authority transpires into a lack of enthusiasm for education and an unwillingness to respect and value the education curriculum here in Wales (Arnold, 2021). Speaking on behalf of the Traveller Education Service in Pembrokeshire, which was established to support the local Traveller community by providing an alternative curriculum as a strategy to improve school attendance statistics and close the attainment and academic achievement gap between Traveller children and pupils of the settled community, Claire Arnold described the main barriers parents have to their children participating in the national curriculum within mainstream schools. One being that due to negative personal experiences, parents of Traveller children often do not value subjects outside of literacy and numeracy and feel as though schools demonstrate a lack of understanding for their culture and heritage (Arnold, 2021). Their concerns lie predominantly with their culture, worrying that it will be somewhat diluted or lost if their children spend too much time with settled communities (BBC News, 2019). While there is no lack of aspiration from Gypsy and Traveller parents for their children, for many, formal

education does not qualify. A poor start in education may be the catalyst that drives the many other inequalities that children and families of nomadic heritage face (Women and Equalities Committee, 2019), and tackling these issues from as early on as Early Years Education is vital to tackling other inequalities which face Traveller communities.

In 2019, the UK Government accepted that Gypsies, Travellers and Roma are among the most disadvantaged people in the country and have poor outcomes in key areas such as health and education (Women and Equalities Committee, 2019). Additionally, they are also the most underrepresented ethnic group in public and private sectors, meaning that policies and legislation rarely take into consideration their needs as British citizens. Research published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission concluded that the problems of inequality within the Gypsy Traveller community are immense and continue to have a direct detrimental impact on the quality of life of Gypsies and Travellers in Britain today. They stressed that urgent action must be taken to ensure they have access to the same services and can access the same rights as the rest of the population (2009).

While a number of independent learning centres have since been set up around the country to improve attainment statistics and close the gap of academic achievement for Gypsy Traveller children, the statistics remain consistent with the general consensus that the education system is continuing to fail Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students. A recent independent report by the Commission of Race and Ethnic Disparities found that patterns of educational and social attainment were lowest among White Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller groups, with only 34% of four- to five-year-olds from Gypsy and Roma ethnic groups meeting expected developmental standards (2021). In addition to this, nearly 50% of registered Gypsy and Roma pupils and over 60% of Irish Travellers were classed as persistent non-attenders (Women and Equalities Committee, 2019). The report also presents evidence that levels of both temporary and permanent exclusions among Traveller pupils are consistently high (Women and Equalities Committee, 2019). These statistics are upheld by the fact that many children of nomadic heritage self-exclude themselves from school due to discrimination from their peers (BBC News, 2019). These statistics are staggering and are profoundly unacceptable. It is vital that schools and practitioners are fulfilling their moral responsibility and legal duty of promoting the education and well-being of pupils of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller identity and that they are providing additional support to address the needs of children from groups at higher risk of exclusion.

Furthermore, in addition to the pervasive and destructive impact that unjust discrimination continuously has on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, a significant number of families are also contending with poverty. A key factor in determining child poverty within the ethnic minority group are the high levels of accommodation insecurities that these families face. For the year ended January

2020, 25% of Gypsy and Traveller sites in Wales were occupying unauthorised land (Statistics for Wales, 2020), thus meaning that its tenants were subject to repeated evictions and are therefore legally classified as homeless (Traveller Movement, 2014, p.5). Being legally classified as homeless presents a plethora of problems for the individuals concerned. In 2009, a review conducted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission noted that without decent accommodation and the ability to live in a manner that supports the Traveller communities through upheavals caused by financial insecurity, globalisation and changing employment markets, Gypsies and Travellers risk being pushed further into poverty, social exclusion and cultural shock (Cemlyn et al. 2009, p.5). Any person who is living in relative poverty is consequently excluded from the normal living patterns exercised by their peers within society. Research suggests that low income and parental unemployment have a strong correlation with low educational performance which makes the option to access additional educational services for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children ever more indispensable. Writing in conjunction to the proposal to dismember the Travelling Education Services in 2018, fifteen-year-old Romany Gypsy Caramia Rafferty expressed her revulsion of the proposal by emphasising the harsh truth of the matter “Millions are spent on removing travellers from illegal sites instead of being put into our education. Do you think we would be living on illegal grounds if we were educated? If the government chose to invest money into us?” (Rafferty, 2018). The sheer lack of these support systems contributes largely to the issue of poverty amongst the Traveller community and directly contributes to the escalating recordings of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children from disadvantaged backgrounds showing poor progression throughout their education (Traveller Movement, 2009).

Another means for analysing the relationship between poverty and education is pupil eligibility to claim Free School Meals. In the academic year 2018-2019, 56% of Traveller children of Irish heritage and 39% of Gypsy and Roma pupils were eligible for Free School Meals (Office for National Statistics, 2020). These statistics indicate that children classified within this group also proportionately experience low income and material deprivation at home (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Regardless of background, every child in Wales has the right to a free education and schools have the facilities and the potential to provide all children with an opportunity to learn, build relationships with peers and teachers and participate in a range of extracurricular activities, regardless of whether or not their families are experiencing financial or other hardship. Schools also have the capability to safeguard children from the impacts of living in poverty. However, the hidden additional costs of schooling for the likes of uniform, classroom materials, school trips and other necessities expose children of low-income families to isolation, exclusion and stigmas as a consequence of suffering financial hardship (Bevan Foundation, 2011). Being a key social issue that directly affects the ability for individuals of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller heritage to access education, it is paramount that more is done in Wales to understand and breakdown the barriers

of poverty within school communities. Understanding and tackling poverty in schools requires a whole school approach and providing additional support to disadvantaged families by prioritising cost, affordability and accessibility for the likes of free school meals, uniforms, classroom materials and school trips is fundamental to promoting inclusion and improving school achievement, attainment and attendance statistics.

Since the turn of the twenty first century, there has been a noticeable shift in the way of policymaking that encourages inclusivity and equal opportunity for all. In 2007, guidance on the Duty to Promote Community Cohesion put in place changes to teaching, learning and the curriculum in order to help young people to understand others and to value diversity while promoting shared values (Goepel, Childerhouse and Sharpe, 2014, p.57). Striving to remove barriers to access and participation, the policy also encouraged the provision of reasonable means for children, young people and their friends and families to interact with people from different backgrounds and to build positive relations (Goepel, Childerhouse and Sharpe, 2014, p.57). The outcomes of this policy promoted positive relations by engaging with local communities and recognised diversity, equality of opportunity and inclusion within teaching for the first time since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1999. In 2010, the Equality Act was introduced which simplified and strengthened laws on discrimination. Under this act, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller individuals are protected against unlawful discrimination, victimisation and harassment in education, the workplace and healthcare to name but a few. However, even with extensive legislation in place to protect individuals of any racial or ethnic background from unlawful discrimination, society in Britain still fails to integrate groups of differing identities. One theory which attempts to understand the reasons for this is the critical race theory. Bourdieu (1994) suggested that although we as individuals have the freedom to navigate the internalisation of our thinking, we are also constrained by our habitus meaning we allow our experiences to structure and define our view of the social world (Goepel, Childerhouse and Sharpe, 2014, p.58). Such constraints may lead us to develop prejudices and support a stereotypical view of race and ethnicity. Critics suggest that that education policy in England and Wales is powerfully dominated by theories of white supremacy (Goepel, Childerhouse and Sharpe, 2014, p.59) which perpetuate feelings of exclusion and discourage children of ethnic minorities to achieve a true sense of belonging. While there have been many attempts to broaden the curriculum and diversify the topics of education taught in school, it is important to understand that the curriculum alone cannot make a difference to race and ethnic equality in the classroom. It is the responsibility of schools and practitioners to implement a positive ethos and to show a willingness and commitment to engage (Goepel, Childerhouse and Sharpe, 2014, p.55).

In practice, in order to make a positive contribution towards achieving equity in society. it is important to listen to children's voices and involve them in decision

making processes. The 'Every Child Matters' Framework states that in order to make a positive contribution, primary schools must demonstrate that they are engaging children in decision making and encouraging them to support the community and the environment through choosing not to partake in anti-social behaviour. They should also demonstrate that they are helping them to build positive relationships and are teaching them to take responsibility for their own actions, while ensuring that they are learning about conflict resolution (DCSF, 2003). This ethos will in turn enable children to develop self-confidence and successfully deal with life-changes and challenges (Knowles, 2009, p.115) and aims to encourage empathy for people of different heritages and ethnic backgrounds. One of the most effective initiatives to give children a sense of inclusion is to involve them in the day-to-day running of schools. By electing a diverse, pupil lead school council, children will be given the excellent opportunity to develop a platform to give them a voice. This will also enable a fair representation of all ethnic groups in attendance of the school. (Knowles, 2009, p.119). Giving children of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller heritage a voice in education could possibly be one of the most effective ways to prevent further marginalisation of the ethnic minority group. In 2018, a Traveller student of the Priory Learning Centre in Pembrokeshire was elected as the first Gypsy representative on the Welsh Youth Parliament (Travelling Ahead, 2019). This is a significant step in the direction of change and works towards resolving the consequences that come with being marginalised by the education system. Another strategy which can be implemented in the pursuit of breaking down barriers to education for pupils of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller heritage is to build and maintain good working relationships with parents, ensuring to uphold good communication skills throughout the child's learning journey (Goepel, Childerhouse and Sharpe, 2009, p.150). Fostering effective relationships with parents regardless of the diverse backgrounds and needs of the children, will encourage cooperation and develop a bond of trust, an aspect which many Traveller parents find difficult. While these effective relationships are usually predominantly built at primary school level, it is paramount that there is funding in place to allow Traveller families the same level of support for the successful transition of pupils into secondary school, the crucial point at which a large number of Traveller children are withdrawn from school by their parents for Elective Home Education (Fensham-Smith, 2014, p.5).

The overarching aim for the future of the education system in Wales is to build a broad and balanced curriculum which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life (The Education Act 2002). Having a positive impact on children during the early stages of their moral development and promoting the acceptance of diversity through the means of education is a vital component in the quest to abolishing the stigmas, stereotypes and prejudices individuals and establishments show towards Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in the UK. Breaking down

the barriers these communities face is the first step towards creating effective change; change that will eliminate social and educational inequalities; change that will enable Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children to access an education free of prejudice, the only education that they deserve. There is no doubt that the efficacy of successful change is in the hands of pedagogues, educators and practitioners alike. They must accept their moral responsibility to guide and encourage children of all backgrounds to achieve to their full potential. To achieve equity and equality of opportunity within education, the conversation around the unacceptance of prejudice, harassment and discrimination towards people of different cultural backgrounds needs to be continuously had, not only at grass roots level but right through to the highest ranks within our parliamentary systems. Only when society works as one homogeneous force against discrimination will true change be made, and a fairer society established.

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