

Learning Tool for professionals

Aim of this tool: *to enable professionals to improve the learning outcomes for children from Roma, Gypsy and Traveller communities*

The following information is designed to raise awareness and to inform professionals and practitioners who are new to working with children and young people from the Roma, Gypsy and Traveller communities. It will include an account of the 'Traveller Journeys' project and lessons Playbus learnt whilst working with these communities as well as giving a brief historical and social outline of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller cultures.

General introduction to working with Roma, Gypsy and Traveller people

The term Gypsy, Roma and Traveller is a generic term used to describe a variety of cultural and ethnic groups. There are many ways in which ethnicity may be established: these include language, nomadic way of life, and self-identification. The classification refers to English Romany Gypsies, who originated from India in the tenth century, Irish Travellers; Scottish and Welsh Travellers; Show or circus people and Bargees, those living a nomadic lifestyle on boats; and New Travellers, who have chosen a nomadic life style rather than through blood lines. Romani Gypsies and Irish Travellers are classified as an ethnic group in their own right through the Race Relations Act of 1976.

Historical background

Romany Gypsies were thought to have originated from Northern India about 1000 AD. Interestingly, Romany language has its roots in Hindi. Over the years Romany Gypsies migrated westwards and are thought to have arrived in England during Henry the V111's reign. It is believed they came from Egypt hence the word, 'Gypsy'. In 1530 Henry V111 prohibited Gypsies to enter the country and Elizabeth 1st later passed a law stating that Gypsies should be put to death and their possessions taken, if they did not give up their way of life. Throughout history Gypsies and Travellers have been persecution for their beliefs and way of life.

Irish Travellers consider themselves to be the indigenous people of Ireland and are one of the oldest Travelling people of the British Isles, speaking Gammon or Cant. There is evidence to suggest there were nomadic people in Ireland before the famine which shows their resistance in the face of many pressures and threats. One of the first reports of Irish travellers in England was

as early as 1850. Subsequent Irish Travellers have come to England for better material conditions and to seek work. After the Second World War there was a further wave of Irish Traveller migration as men came over from Ireland to build motorways and work as labourers.

Discrimination

Hostility and aggression has grown towards Travellers and Gypsies in recent years, making this the last acceptable racism in the country. The Children's society reports that 9 out of 10 children and young people from a Roma, Gypsy or Traveller background have suffered racial abuse and been bullied or physically attacked. Roma, Gypsy and Traveller people are often misrepresented by the media; views tend to be biased and prejudiced and may have the effect of inciting hatred from the settled community. "...Gypsies .. are granted immunity and given privileges. The rule of law is flouted daily by people who don't pay taxes, give nothing to society and yet expect to be treated as untouchables." (*The Sun newspaper. 10.3.05*)

Since 1994 there has been no obligation from councils to provide site provision, whilst at the same time a law was passed making it illegal to stop by the road side. Consequently this has made it very difficult to travel around. Many Travellers and Gypsies were forced to buy their own sites but were refused planning permission, effectively making them homeless.

Healthcare

Gypsies and Travellers endure the highest rate of infant mortality and the lowest life expectancy than any other social group. Travellers and Gypsies are between 2 to 5 times more likely to experience health problems than the settled community. This might include anxiety, breathing problems such as asthma and bronchitis and chest pain. Women are more likely to suffer from miscarriages, still births and the death of babies and young children.

Education

A vast percentage of the Roma, Gypsy and Traveller community are illiterate. OfSTED reports that children and young people from Roma, Gypsy and Traveller communities are considered 'the most at risk in the education system' OfSTED Report. These assessments have been confirmed by data coming from the School Census since 2003. These children are the lowest attaining amongst all Ethnic Minority groups in the city and nationally. Statistically there are disproportionate number of exclusions from schools of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children.

Setting the 'Traveller Journeys' project in context

Playbus was awarded funding through the Heritage Lottery to work with Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children and young people in Bristol and South Gloucestershire, the aim being to celebrate and promote their culture and heritage. A further aspect of the project was to raise awareness of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller culture within local communities, with the hope of changing common misconceptions.

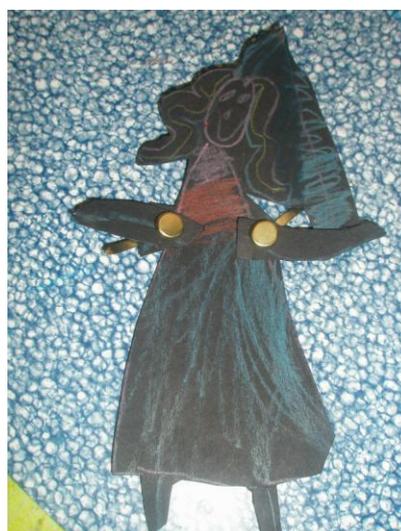
Three workshops were set up in to work with children and young people from these communities. These were at Holy Family Primary school working with Irish Travellers; City Academy Secondary school, with young people from the Roma community (this was after school hours and the workshops were optional) and Rose Meadows Traveller site, in which participants were English and Irish Gypsies and Travellers. Approximately 30 children accessed the workshops which ran for up to ten weeks; the average age of children was between eight and ten years, with the exception of the Roma community who were between eleven and fifteen years of age. Workshops for Roma young people were held in a secondary school in which they were also students at the school.

It is significant to point out that when setting up workshops on Traveller sites, the age range of participants is likely to be far more varied, older children are often responsible for younger ones, and to bar small children might exclude older siblings. An example of this was at the workshop held at Rose Meadows Traveller site, in which the age range was between one and twelve years of age. This meant we had to be flexible and differentiate activities in the sessions and well as being aware of health and safety issues, for instance working with glue and scissors. A lesson we learnt was that when working with story, some of the vocabulary was too difficult for young children to understand. Working with a varied age range was challenging in the sense that some of the older children considered some of the activities 'childish'. Traveller and Gypsy girls tend to perceive themselves as more grown up than the average ten year old, so trying to engage them in play can be more challenging and needs to be handled sensitively and age appropriately.

The Traveller and Gypsy children chose to work with art materials to create pictures of their way of life. They made old fashioned Gypsy wagons from shoe boxes which they painted and decorated as well as drawing and making 2D and 3D horses. Horses are an important part of their way of life and they got huge enjoyment from recreating these animals in various formats. Other activities included using Gypsy folk stories as a stimulus for making hand puppets and shadow

puppets and acting out old stories, as well as recreating new ones. The children created collages depicting Traveller and Gypsy culture. As trust grew and they got to know us week by week, they shared more about their culture and way of life, particularly whilst creating the collages. Using images and art seemed a more comfortable way into talking about Traveller culture, and what emerged was a strong sense of pride in their identity and way of life.





The girls at the primary school wanted to do music and dance and created dances to popular music as well as singing in sessions. At times there was a gender divide with the boys wanting to do art work and physical games and the girls wanting to sing and dance. It may have been more appropriate to have held separate workshops for boys and girls for some of the sessions. Roma, Gypsy and Traveller cultures are more traditional in terms of gender roles and have strict moral rules around courtship and marriage as children get older. This was more apparent when working with the Roma community at City Academy. After the first two sessions the girls dropped out of the workshops. This was partly to do with there being another activity going on at the same time as our workshops which involved the girls, but it could also have been to do with having both boys and girls of teenage years in the group together which may be deemed inappropriate.

We found that language and communication was a barrier when working with the Roma community as English is not their first language and many of the young people had only been in the country for two to three years. It was more challenging to engage them in the workshops and find a way in, learning what they wanted to do, as well as fulfilling the aims of the project. Several of the boys wanted to experiment with dance, this being a fusion between traditional Roma dance and the western style of street dance. After being introduced to some games as part of the workshop warm up, they also wanted to play games which other young people of their age may have found childish, such as Grandfather's keys, musical chairs and statues. It is perhaps interesting to note that play is not a part of Roma culture as Roma communities have historically lived in poor and overcrowded conditions on the margins of society. They are one of the most deprived communities in Europe. Many of the young people we worked with originally came from Romania and had only been living in Bristol for two or three years. It was particularly important to listen to what the young people wanted to do so that a growing relationship of trust could be built. There is a traditional mistrust of outsiders within Roma culture but it is also significant to bear in mind the discrimination they have suffered historically and continue to suffer, even within Western European countries.

A note on culture, it is of the utmost importance not to impose what we in the settled community perceive as Roma, Gypsy and Traveller culture. It has been suggested that this culture is more romanticised and misunderstood than any other. Culture is forever changing and whilst children and young people from these communities are proud of their heritage and way of life, they also belong to a more modern world which they access easily through media and modern music; in effect straddling both cultures. In workshops, participants wanted to work with modern music and dance. It would have been patronising to have limited them to what may have been perceived by us, as traditional Roma, Gypsy and traveller culture. It was important to listen to what they wanted to do and to include this within workshops as this was also a part of celebrating their culture. It is as a result of the younger generation in any culture that cultures evolve, change and adapt.

The event to celebrate Roma, Gypsy and Traveller culture

As I have previously stated it is worth remembering that the term Roma, Gypsy and Traveller is a generic term incorporating different ethnic groups, cultures and ways of being. This was highlighted during the event we held for Roma, Gypsy and Travellers to celebrate their culture/s. In many ways each group were also learning about each other as they are segregated from each

other and do not always understand one another, sometimes holding prejudiced views themselves. The event was successful as the Roma, Romany Gypsies and Irish travellers intermingled and found common ground with each other. Irish Travellers engaged in friendly arm wrestling with Rome boys and there was a 'dance off' between the Roma and The Irish Travellers. The day was a huge success and all factions of the community were proud of their shared nomadic heritage.

