

GRT SERVICE

Supporting Roma children in your school or setting



Norfolk
County Council

History of Romani people in brief

The Romani people, also known as Roma, Sinti or Sindhi, or Kale are an Indo-Aryan ethnic group who live primarily in Europe. They originated in northwest regions of India and left sometime between the 6th and 11th centuries to work in Middle Eastern courts of their own volition, or as slaves.

The word “Roma” means “man” and refers to many different sub-groups, including Kalderash in south-eastern Europe; Romanichals in England; Sinti in Germany, Italy, and France; Kalé in Wales, Finland, Spain and Portugal; and Gitano from Spain. Roma have a common language, Romanës, which has different dialects.

The Romani have been described by Diana Muir Appelbaum, American historian, as unique among peoples because they have never identified themselves with a territory; they have no tradition of an ancient and distant homeland from which their ancestors migrated, nor do they claim the right to national sovereignty in any of the lands where they reside. Rather, Romani identity is bound up with the ideal of freedom expressed, in part, in having no ties to a homeland.



The largest ethnic minority in Europe

Roma are the largest and most disadvantaged ethnic minority in Europe. An estimated 10 to 12 million Roma currently live in Europe. There are around 200,000 Gypsy/Roma in the UK and approximately 13,000 in the East of England.

In Norfolk, the GRT Service work with Roma families from countries such as Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Portugal, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Turkey.

Understanding Roma culture

The lives of Roma revolve around their families and family life often takes priority.

It is important that when Roma children start school, they have both their individual personality and culture respected. Many of the children are multilingual, which is known to be very beneficial in terms of their educational development.

The Roma culture being an oral one is rich with anecdotes, songs, lullabies, fairytales, and folkloristic language games.

Supporting Roma families and culture

The Parallel Lives Project (2020) identified several challenges faced by professionals working with the Roma community. This included teachers struggling with the diverse needs of Roma children and their families. Families often had transient lifestyles which had an impact on the children's access to education. Schools often needed then to guide families through the complexities of not just registering for school places, but also accessing appropriate housing, health care and other forms of support.



The GRT Service focus primarily on supporting Roma children in the context of education and activities and also can help to communication between schools and families. This is achieved by focusing on relations between the school and families and raising both school and community awareness and informing the Roma community about school-related issues. Special attention is paid to areas such as enrolment, attendance and achievement.

Starting school

Roma children often do not receive any preparation for starting school and can face a combination of comprehension, concentration and motivation issues, and some may become disengaged. As for all children, Roma have considerably better chances of succeeding at school if they receive pre-school education. The GRT Service work in partnership with a range of Norfolk agencies to offer a holistic programme of early years support for GRT families through outreach and building up relationships of trust.

Having limited knowledge of the English language is frequently identified as one of the prime barriers for Roma children in school. The importance of mother tongue for cognitive development and the educational advantages over monolingual children is well documented. Therefore, the inclusion of the home language in developmentally appropriate early childhood settings is beneficial to young children's growth and development and provides a bridge between languages and cultures.

Ascription

Some members of the community do not ascribe to their Roma ethnicity for fear of discrimination. By working closely with Roma communities, schools can encourage the children to develop a positive social identity and to have pride in their culture.

Recommendations for schools

Roma pupils come from diverse linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds. Before pupils start school, try to gather as much information as possible during the induction process such as schooling in another country, literacy level in Roma/first/other languages, country of origin, parents' English level, years of schooling in the UK, and pupils' speaking, listening, reading and writing levels.

After the induction, inform teachers and the school management about languages spoken in the families of the Roma pupils and advise about the best ways to make these languages recognised and, if possible, visible within the school to improve the perception that Roma children and their parents have about the school.

Bilingualism has to be taken into account in the planning and implementation of educational activities. Encourage and value the use of Roma/first language in school. Learn some words (greetings, basic words in a conversation) and show this way your respect for the Roma community.

Roma pupils will be at different stages of English language acquisition (from complete beginner to advanced bilingual). An appropriate assessment must be used to assess and monitor the language progress of Roma pupils.



Schools should pay particular attention to ensuring the best possible communication with parents, where necessary using the NCC GRT service, INTRAN, interpreters or mediators from the Roma/Gypsy community.

When planning lessons, there should be a focus on both language and subject content. Content and language integrated learning approaches must be encouraged in all subject areas.

Roma students bring a diverse range of understanding, skills and experiences to the learning situation by virtue of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. These are 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al 1992) that students bring with them. It would be helpful if schools could:

- positively acknowledge and value the Roma cultural and linguistic heritages of their students and the roles these play in shaping their identities.
- consciously incorporate and develop the understanding, skills and experiences of students from Roma backgrounds.
- promote respect for and understanding and valuing of Roma students.

Include Roma, Gypsy and Traveller history and culture in the curriculum. The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers adopted a recommendation in 2020 that for the first time ever calls on its 47 member states to include the history of Roma Gypsy and/or Travellers in the school curriculum and teaching materials.

Have a rich and culturally inclusive environment where the Roma culture is reflected in displays

Actively develop links and effective partnerships with the wider minority ethnic and Roma/Gypsy communities. Consider appointing a GRT champion/co-ordinator within school.

Roma voices – Roma support group

Extracted from Education A Roma Perspective - Roma Support Group

Top Tips for teachers from Roma young people.

1. “Talk more in schools about Roma. Just like we do in Religious Education about other groups of people.”
2. “Have more training for teachers about who European Roma are and the difference between us and Gypsy and Traveller communities in the UK so they feel more comfortable to talk about this.”
3. “Always respond when you hear derogatory language and remarks made about us at school and show other pupils this is not acceptable.”
4. “School policies about racism should make specific reference to anti-gypsyism because so many people still do not understand this is also racism.”
5. “Allow girls who wish to wear long skirts the freedom to do so just as some schools allow children from different faiths to wear certain clothing.”
6. “Don’t encourage the stereotypes by assuming that education is not important to us. This may be the case for some young people but speak to us as individuals and ask us what we want.”
7. “Be careful about where you put paperwork which may state our ethnicity. If we feel confident to say we are Roma to school staff it doesn’t always mean we want other pupils to know.”
8. “Family is very important to Roma people and we will always respect our parent’s wishes. School is much easier for us when there is a good relationship between our teachers and home. Especially when we want to go on school trips and our parents are worried about us!”

Further reading:

- **Education: a Roma perspective**
www.belongnetwork.co.uk/resources/education-a-roma-perspective
- **Roma support group** www.romasupportgroup.org.uk/
- **The right of Roma Children to education**
www.unicef.org/eca/reports/right-roma-children-education
- **A curriculum framework for Romani**
www.coe.int/en/web/language-policy/romani
- **Education and training of Roma children and youth: The way forward** www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/roma/Source/Report_Bratislava2008_EN.pdf
- **Overcoming barriers: ensuring that Roma children are fully engaged and achieving in education**
www.gov.uk/government/publications/ensuring-roma-children-achieve-in-education
- **Education of Roma children in Europe. Guide for Roma school mediators/assistants**
www.schooleducationgateway.eu/files/esl/downloads/07_Guide_for_Roma_School_Mediators.pdf
- **The Roma genocide** www.hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/nazi-persecution/the-roma-genocide/
- **History of the Romani people**
www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZZSiTIC-WE

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