

Issues in Roma education: the relationship between language and the educational needs of Roma students

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ABSTRACT

Roma students in the UK are reported as having significantly lower levels of educational attainment than their UK peers (DfE 2014). Existing research has attributed this to the multifaceted barriers Roma students face as an intrinsic part of their educational trajectory in the UK. Language as a barrier to educational engagement for Roma young people and, subsequently, their differentiated educational needs are repeated as key barriers across much of this research. This article seeks to explore the outcomes of the interrelation between these two significant barriers to educational engagement as a prerequisite to exploring strategies to improve educational outcomes for Roma students in the UK.

KEYWORDS

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SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS
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INTRODUCTION

Roma are a traditionally nomadic group whose origins lie in India. There is little documented historically about Roma communities, probably because of a lack of literacy across the community, coupled with widespread social exclusion. That which is recorded depicts centuries of abhorrent experiences of prejudice and a community forced to live on the outskirts of mainstream society. Radu (2009) contends that initial Roma experiences of discrimination could have been attributable to the Hindu customs Roma carried when they first travelled to Europe from India, which would have been unfamiliar to Europeans. Following this, many Roma in Eastern Europe were pushed

into slavery and in the year 1500 there were mass killings of Roma across wider Europe, including 'hangings and expulsions in England; branding and the shaving of heads in France' (Radu 2009). Furthermore, the Roma were subject to forced assimilation across Western Europe during the 'Age of Enlightenment' (Radu 2009). The persecution of Roma, which continued for centuries and spanned entire generations, culminated in the Holocaust, during which up to 500,000 Roma are believed to have been killed, many of whom were subjected to experiments within extermination camps (Radu 2009). Arguably, the severity of these discriminatory acts has had considerable impact on the cultural heritage of the Roma community and continues to influence

their integration in contemporary society.

Today, there are an estimated 12 million Roma living in Europe, the majority of whom reside in central Eastern Europe (Tanner 2005). The migration of Roma communities to the UK increased as a result of A2 and A8 countries successively acceding to the European Union (EU) in 2004 and 2007 respectively (Shelter 2016). This expansion of the EU provided increased migration opportunities for Roma citizens from these countries, leading to an increase in the representation of one of Europe's most vulnerable ethnic minorities in the ethnic composition of the UK (Amnesty International n.d.). Following this, in 2011 the EU published a framework

for the development of integration for Roma communities living within EU member states up to 2020 (European Commission 2011). The framework called for every member state to implement a National Roma Integration Strategy which would leave 'no room for the persistent economic and social marginalisation of what constitutes Europe's largest minority' (European Commission 2011: 2). The UK government, however, despite a recent increase in migration of Roma to the UK, chose to 'use existing, mainstream policy and legal mechanisms to deliver Roma Integration rather than develop a National Roma Integration Strategy' (Lane et al. 2014: 1). Research into the impact of a lack of specialised support for Roma integration has found this approach wanting, particularly with regard to the educational engagement of Roma pupils, who are recorded as having the lowest rates of educational attainment nationally (Lane et al. 2014).

Further disadvantage is imposed on Roma communities in the UK as a result of the inability of policy to differentiate Roma from other gypsy and traveller groups. Currently, Roma in the UK are ethnically grouped under the collective of Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT). This lack of differentiation across three distinct ethnic groups lends itself to an absence of statistical evidence about the Roma community in the UK and has perpetuated difficulties in developing effective strategies for integration and cohesion due to a lack of understanding of the 'inherent complexity' of Roma communities (Acton 2005: 2). The need to distinguish between ethnic groups within this collective is particularly apparent in educational institutions, where Roma students become lost in statistics pertaining to the wider collective of Gypsy, Roma, Traveller. Henderson points out that research undertaken by Ofsted cited a percentile of Gypsy, Roma, Traveller students achieving a specific educational standard, though closer breakdown of the statistic reveals that Roma students in three UK cities

did not achieve the standard outlined in the research (Ofsted 2014 in Henderson 2017). Without effective means of measuring the educational engagement of Roma students as distinct from the wider Gypsy, Roma, Traveller collective, there is a significant risk of strategies to promote educational engagement for Roma pupils being rendered entirely ineffective.

LANGUAGE AS A BARRIER

General Comment No.1 by the Committee on the Rights of the Child recognises that the provision of formal education is not in and of itself sufficient to ensure access and availability to education. (Pohjolainen 2014: 16)

For many migrant Roma students in the UK, an educational provision whereby attendance is compulsory and students are not segregated as a result of their Roma heritage is the inverse of their educational experiences in their home countries, which are likely to have been rife with adversity. Consequently, there is not necessarily an affinity within the Roma community with educational institutions and it is imperative that educational provision in the UK seeks to adopt bespoke strategies to increase the educational engagement of Roma pupils, arguably the most critical of which is to address language barriers. Within Europe, there is not one school in which Roma is the primary language (Pohjolainen 2014: 16). Therefore, as a prerequisite to accessing education Roma students must learn an additional language, and consequently their educational needs are differentiated prior to them ever entering a classroom.

Furthermore, research has found that almost all Roma children arriving in the UK education system from Eastern Europe are new to speaking English, and often prefer speaking the language of the Eastern European country they have come to the UK from (Lever 2012). The same research found that this barrier has been

exacerbated due to a lack of multilingual specialist staff being employed to bridge this gap (Lever 2012). In addition, a report written by Ofsted in 2014 found that a lack of qualified teachers with the relevant expertise to support Roma students learning English as an additional language (EAL) had implications for their educational engagement (Ofsted 2014). Moreover, research into the educational experiences of Roma students has shown that where specialist staff were put in place to minimise language barriers, they were often non-Roma; the research suggested that in some cases this strategy could be seen to 'reinforce the sense of racial intolerance experienced by Roma in their own countries' (Lever 2012: 14). Therefore, it could be suggested that whilst there is a need for increased language support for Roma students in UK educational institutions, to employ staff from EU member countries where there are known to be high levels of cultural intolerance towards the Roma could be seen to perpetuate racial discrimination through the replication of racially charged situations in wider Europe in the microcosms of educational institutions in the UK.

There is evidence to suggest that language barriers are exacerbated in cases where wider family members lack English language skills (Pohjolainen 2014). Concurrent to this, migrant Roma have been recorded as arriving in the UK with significant lack of literacy abilities (Brown et al. 2013: 48). Consequently, the educational experience of Roma students is often limited to their time spent at school and is not continued in the home environment. Conversely, any celebration of Roma language or culture is often limited to the home and is not widely acknowledged across educational institutions. In the UK, the national government does encourage third sector organisations and schools to work together to implement initiatives around the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Month; however, schools have autonomy with regard to the inclusion of the month within

curriculum delivery and are not obliged to offer any provision specifically pertaining to the celebratory month (Zahawi 2018). This lack of cultural and lingual awareness could be seen to contravene Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that

parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own. (UNICEF 1990: 9)

Certainly, an absence of cultural celebration around Roma culture could be seen as detrimental to the educational engagement of Roma. Research in the UK has shown that Roma students' educational engagement has been significantly influenced by the emphasis schools place on the celebration of 'cultural diversity' and the 'fostering of pride in individual and group identity' (Bhattacharyya et al. 2003: 16).

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF LEARNERS

In 2017 the Department of Education reported that Gypsy/Roma students were one of the ethnic groups in which Special Educational Needs (SEN) were 'most prevalent' (DfE 2017: 9). Furthermore, there is evidence of an over-representation of Roma pupils in alternative educational institutions in the UK; in 2017, 0.9% of pupils who were enrolled in pupil referral units identified as Roma, compared to 0.3% of pupils who were enrolled in state schools and identified as Roma (Thompson n.d.). Whilst widespread aversity to authorities and subsequent lack of educational engagement in Roma communities may be a contributing factor to these statistics, it should also be considered that an alternative causation of the over-representation of Roma students within SEN provisions could be an unintentional

replication of their previous educational experiences within UK classrooms.

Certainly, the absence of dynamic approaches to reducing language as a barrier to educational engagement for Roma students in the UK risks echoing the educational experiences of Roma students who have migrated from countries in which there are still high levels of discrimination against their community. In 2013 the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the governments of member countries must end segregation of Roma students residing in their countries. This ruling came as a result of repeated and systematic misdiagnosis of mental disability in Roma students in Hungary which was found to violate human rights law (Roma Education Fund n.d.). Despite this, the issue of inappropriate educational segregation for Roma students is ongoing; in 2018 it was asserted during a United Nations Forum on Minority Issues that in the Czech Republic, 'Roma children continue to be allocated to schools designed for children with disabilities in an arbitrary system and in a disproportionate manner' (Ionita 2018: 1:15:35). The outcome of these adverse educational experiences of Roma young people in contemporary society is summarised by Amnesty International, who contend that as a result of widespread and systematic exclusion from education, 'Roma have significantly lower enrolment and completion rates in primary education than the general population in countries across Europe' (Amnesty International n.d.: 7). A further and inevitable outcome of this is that those Roma who undergo a substandard education become disaffected with the system, often failing to obtain any educational achievements, and subsequently are resigned to experiences of 'severe disadvantage in the labour market' (Amnesty International n.d.: 3).

Despite these adverse educational experiences of Roma students, in 2014 a report written by Ofsted, aimed at ensuring that Roma children are fully

engaged and achieving in education, found that often the work given to Roma students was not differentiated to account for their educational experiences in their home country (Ofsted 2014). Arguably, this puts Roma pupils at a considerable educational disadvantage from the outset of their educational experience in the UK. The same report found that, in one case, 'the teaching assistant did not see the difference between a pupil who had special educational needs and one who was learning English as an additional language' (Ofsted 2014: 16). This is corroborated by professionals in one locality in the East of England, who have reported observing similar situations in which professionals report having difficulty differentiating between Special Educational Needs of students and their needs as an EAL learner (P. Sayers, personal communication, 29 March 2018). These examples of professionals' inability to effectively identify the educational needs of Roma pupils echo the educational experiences of Roma pupils across Europe, where segregated schooling proliferates. Whilst in wider Europe educational segregation of Roma pupils is more likely to be attributable to prejudice against Roma communities, as opposed to a lack of undertaking about the educational needs of Roma pupils in the UK, the outcome for Roma students is the same: an inability to effectively engage with their education.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nationally, there is evidence of local approaches having proved successful in addressing language as a barrier, in the absence of specialised support for Roma integration. In 2009 Fremlova conducted research into the disparities between the educational experience of Roma pupils studying in mainstream UK schools and their peers who were educated in the Czech Republic or Slovakia. As part of this research she investigated the strategies employed by Babington College in Leicester to improve educational

outcomes for Roma pupils (Fremlova 2009). Fremlova reported that the school has engaged Roma pupils successfully, with a total of nine of them in the previous academic year having left with five A*–G grade GCSEs (Fremlova 2009). Fremlova partially accredits this to how the student's educational needs were interpreted by teaching staff. One of the predominant educational needs identified in the report concerned language barriers for migrant Roma pupils; however, in Babington College language barriers were not equated to a pupil having Special Educational Needs (Fremlova 2009). Similarly, in 2015 Penfold reported on the findings of staff at Winterhill Secondary School in Rotherham who had found improvements in educational attainment for Roma pupils where the priority for learning was placed on English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes over the attainment of GCSEs (Penfold 2015). Both of these examples highlight the importance of effective lingual support in promoting effective educational engagement. Thus, in order to create sustainable, widespread and effective change there is a need for increased recognition and dissemination of good practice in educational institutions which are employing strategies to promote integration through support from wider local services, as a means of overcoming the segregation experienced by Roma students in wider Europe.

Consequently, there is onus on staff within local education institutions to initiate strategies for improved educational engagement of Roma students. The success of using ESOL classes to engage students as outlined by Fremlova could be extended to include the wider family to promote a relationship between the educational institution and the home (Fremlova 2009). To ensure a holistic approach to this inclusivity, staff could consider implementing strategies to promote normalisation of Roma culture. Such a normalisation could invoke a wider understanding of how Roma

are differentiated within the collective of Roma, Gypsy, Traveller. As Foster & Norton articulate, a celebration of Gypsy, Roma, Traveller History Month (GRTHM) within educational institutions can encourage wider services to engage with the month and then increase local awareness about these communities and reduce discrimination; 'GRTHM is showing the potential to change the way society and the communities think about and celebrate culture and history' (Foster & Norton 2012: 106). It is these strategies which, if well informed and appropriately governed, could be fundamental in effecting change for Roma students across local education institutions.

A national approach is required to support teachers in further developing their understanding of the Travellers' cultures, including the variation within these two groups, and the development of positive curricular and teaching approaches to enhance these pupils' learning and reduce disaffection. (Lindsay et al. 2006: 12)

To ensure economic support and sustainability, any interventions to support educational engagement of Roma students should be disseminated by national government. A reconsideration of the UK's policy with regard to the National Framework for Roma Integration is therefore absolutely necessary because 'without any compensation from government, services are likely to struggle – to the detriment of the integration of Roma and wider community relations' (Morris 2016: 3). This is even more poignant within the political context of Brexit. Brexit will undoubtedly exacerbate existing issues for Roma communities and is likely to increase reports of tension between Roma communities and wider society (Morris 2016). Therefore, whilst local approaches, coupled with the voice of Roma, are critical for developing an approach to increasing educational engagement for Roma students, it is also important that the national government have a key role in disseminating

information to ensure a wide reach, in addition to a consistent approach to create effective and long-lasting change for Roma students in the UK. ■

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