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**RESEARCH REPORT**

The Educational, Linguistic and  
Social Integration of the  
Slovakian Roma Children at  
Firth Park Academy, Sheffield

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# Introduction

Academies Enterprise Trust (AET) is the largest multi-sponsor of academies in the U.K. The Trust was established in September 2008 with an inclusive vision to inspire young people to make their best better (AET, 2015). The Trust comprises 68 academies clustered across the country; 33 primary academies, 30 secondary academies and 5 special academies, all committed to developing outstanding practice and giving all our children and pupils, many of whom are from very challenging environments, a first-rate education and a variety of enriching life experiences through their schooling. AET believes in 'research in action' and is constantly seeking innovative practice to improve educational outcomes in their academies, including for those with disabilities and/or special educational needs, those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable, those whose first language is not English and, of course, our most able young people.

Building on our vision and belief in research in action, AET is proud to provide research funding for the project presented in this report. Working in close partnership with the University of Sheffield and Firth Park Academy, we conducted research into our Slovakian Roma cohort, their educational, linguistic and social integration and aimed to arrive at a greater understanding of how we can develop outstanding practice in relation to what has traditionally been viewed in wider society as an underachieving demographic (Ofsted, 2014). These understandings will enable us at AET to address wider issues in relation to pupil diversity as we move forward in times of increased migration and superdiversity.

Findings from this study will also have a significant wider impact. There are many schools across the UK working with Roma children and families from Slovakia as well as other parts of Eastern Europe. The findings from this study will find resonance with them: "... a single case study can ... be of value to practitioners in the same field of work" (Taylor et al., 2006, p.28). The study will also be of value to practitioners and policy makers working with and for the Slovakian Roma and other Eastern European Roma groups beyond the field of education.

## School profile

Firth Park Academy is a trust-led coeducational secondary school located in the north of Sheffield, South Yorkshire. Formerly a Local Authority maintained comprehensive school, Firth Park became part of the Academies Enterprise Trust in August 2013. In the past school year (2014/2015) the school had an average roll of 977<sup>1</sup> pupils in the age range 11-16, making it an average sized secondary academy (Department for Education, 2015). The proportion of disadvantaged students supported through the pupil premium is 64.9%, over twice the national average, with 39.7% of the pupils eligible for free school meals. In terms of languages other than English, some 39.3% of the pupils do not have English as their first language, making the proportion of 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL) students, again, over twice the national average. The proportion of students who have 'special education needs or a disability' (SEND) is above average, with 21% of the pupils in the past school year described as having SEND. Based on the Ofsted inspection in June 2015 the school is Grade 2 rated 'Good' (Office for Standards in Education, 2015).

The school is situated within a large estate of mainly tenant-occupied council-owned housing (Payne, 2014). Many of the pupils in school are, according to the UK Census 2011 terminology (Office for National Statistics, 2012), 'White British' (49%), followed by Pakistani heritage (11%), Roma and other Eastern European (10%) and 25% 'Other' (School statistics, 2015). With many of the 'other' pupils being of various ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, according to Payne (2014) the school presents as a 'typical' UK multilingual, multicultural, and multi-ethnic state comprehensive school (see e.g. Marland, 1987; Rampton, Harris, & Leung, 1997).

However, Payne (2014) points out that over the past five years residential areas close to the school have seen unprecedented immigration from Eastern Europe, principally comprised of Slovak Roma families (Home Office, 2014; Pidd, 2013). According to Sheffield Council figures, 1,500 Slovak Roma live in Fir Vale/Page Hall (Sheffield City Council, 2014b). Based on a neighbourhood count of Roma *pupils* of primary and secondary school age, there were 1843 Roma pupils in Sheffield on 7 April 2014 of which 891 lived in the Page Hall region (Sheffield City Council, 2014a). As a result, Firth Park Academy has experienced a particularly large influx of Roma pupils over the last five years meaning that the numbers of Roma students at any given time is around 100.

Therefore, Firth Park Academy has faced a number of challenges and, in meeting these, has had to adjust its processes and practices in integrating and supporting the 'New to English' (NTE) pupils, adapt curriculum provision and teaching methodologies for those students and enhance provision for the teaching and

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<sup>1</sup> Compiling accurate synchronous statistics is problematic in a large urban comprehensive school with frequent family and pupil movement in and out of the catchment.

learning of English as an Additional Language (EAL) (Payne, 2014). One of the main changes brought about by the arrival of large numbers of Slovak Roma pupils was the implementation of NTE classes: When entering the Academy, all EAL pupils have to sit an English test and are then allocated to NTE classes according to their age group. At the time of the study there were three NTE classes at Firth Park Academy, each combining two year groups. Apart from Maths, Art and PE lessons, in which the NTE pupils learn with their year group peers in their 'regular' timetabled classes, the new arrivals are mainly taught English. NTE pupils are assessed on average every four weeks and, depending on their school history – e.g. whether they have been schooled in the UK prior to FPA – and their progress, they then transfer into the mainstream classes, where they join their year group peers.

Regarding the Roma pupil cohort at Firth Park Academy, the main challenges members of staff face are to ensure that Roma pupils access the curriculum, that they integrate into the school community, and that home-school relationships are established in order to increase Roma pupils' attendance and attainment in school.

## Study outline

The aim of this AET-commissioned project was to research the educational, linguistic and social integration of Slovak Roma pupils at Firth Park Academy. It was conducted over a period of two school terms between February and June 2015.

In order to gain a full picture, multiple research methods were applied to examine the whole-school policies and practices in relation to the Roma children. At first, the work of the individual curriculum departments in relation to subject-specific integration and education issues was investigated to highlight challenges as well as good practice. In order to incorporate the views of all parties involved, individual interviews were conducted with key school staff, focus group interviews were held with Roma pupils, and parents were interviewed during home visits. In addition, lessons were observed to investigate the progress pupils made in terms of integration and attainment. The study also had a particular focus on Roma parents and issues concerning home-school liaison and parental support for student attendance and attainment.

## Key findings

The key findings of the study at Firth Park Academy are:

- ▶ Flexibility in curriculum planning enables teachers to meet Roma pupils' needs and to increase their educational outcomes in school. Through establishing networks among teachers across different departments a supportive platform is created for exchanging ideas, developing teaching strategies, and for discussing present issues and challenges concerning the Roma pupil cohort.
- ▶ Positive teachers' beliefs regarding the Roma migrant demographic have a beneficial impact on the school's endeavours in raising the attainment and attendance of Roma pupils in school.
- ▶ NTE classes have the potential to support Roma pupils with their adjustment to the UK educational system.
- ▶ The employment of Teaching Assistants (TAs) from the local Roma community has the potential to facilitate positive school-family relationships.

## Flexibility in curriculum planning and interdepartmental networking

The study findings suggest that a flexible approach to curriculum planning and pedagogical practices when teaching classes with large cohorts of Roma pupils helps teachers to successfully ensure Roma pupils' access to the curriculum. This finding is supported by Wilkin et al., (2009) who emphasise the positive impact of a flexible and creative curriculum to ensure pupils' engagement and achievement.

As described by staff members, as well as observed in lessons, teaching practices were adjusted in multiple ways to meet the needs of newly arrived Roma pupils. Interventions included altering the explanations of tasks by using basic vocabulary and short sentences, incorporating Roma translations of keywords into the lesson design and making sure that all Roma pupils understood what they had to do:

*“In my experience it is helpful to provide Roma pupils with the translations of some mathematical terms when explaining a task. Furthermore, we talk about those key terms and I encourage them to give me some examples so that I know if they understand a certain concept.” (Maths Teacher)*

Furthermore, graphic representations and extralinguistic gestures were used for explaining tasks. One PE teacher for instance stated:

*“In PE I always show pupils how they should do an exercise. The Roma girls I teach always listen and watch, so language is not a problem. Some pupils need individual help, when they do not do an exercise right, but all of them from time to time do, not only the Roma.” (PE Teacher)*

Other teachers encourage students to complete challenging tasks without relying on too much support, by allowing Roma pupils to speak in their own language during lessons, in order to help each other out:

*“I explain the task to them and make sure that at least some of the Roma pupils understand what they have to do, but I am not doing the work for them. I then let them explain the task to each other in Roma/Slovak, so that they can support each other.” (Business Studies Teacher)*

*“I think it is important to give students the opportunity to teach each other. Students with better numeracy skills support the weaker ones by explaining tasks in Roma.” (Maths Teacher)*

In addition to restructuring lessons and changing teaching approaches in order to facilitate the needs of newly arrived Roma pupils, some departments adopted exams that are more accessible for the Roma pupil cohort to ensure their chance of gaining a qualification, such as the Arts Award Bronze Qualification ([Artsaward.org.uk](http://Artsaward.org.uk)):

*“In Dancing, the Roma pupils’ practical work is brilliant and so what we do in terms of exams is that we give them tests which are not so heavy on language or written work, so that we can give them some qualifications.” (Dance Teacher)*

In general, the findings suggest that staff members had positive experiences teaching classes with a large proportion of Roma pupils, particularly if they were flexible with adjusting the curriculum and teaching methods according to the needs of all pupils in the classroom. In classes where the curriculum was altered, Roma pupils actively engaged in class and, according to teachers’ reports, showed good progress. In summary, it is assumed that flexibility in teaching methods has a positive impact on Roma pupils’ attainment and engagement in class.

In addition, flexibility in curriculum planning is reflected in many teachers’ efforts to establish interdepartmental networks: The results of the analysis of staff member interviews suggest that teachers



perceived the exchange of ideas and teaching strategies, or the discussion of incidents and issues concerning the new arrivals from Eastern Europe, to be highly important for the successful teaching of Roma pupils. In particular, some departments actively took initiative, sought collaborations with other departments and developed strategies in order to ensure that Roma pupils could access the curriculum: The Science department, for example, reacted to the sudden influx of high numbers of low ability English speakers in class by introducing a new style of curriculum. This curriculum was worked out in collaboration with the Language department, and is more task-based and comprises a key-word system. One Science teacher, explaining their newly developed approach, stated:

*“Half of each lesson we focus on five key words, the terminology: We give the pupils sheets with pictures, we let them copy the words, they have to do match up exercises linking definitions and pictures, we talk about the words, give some examples, and also play games, like bingo...They make nice progress and it works.”*  
(Science Teacher A)

In conclusion, it can be assumed that departmental and interdepartmental cooperation can provide the individual teacher with a supportive network that helps him/her to reflect on issues with the Roma and to widen intervention and teaching strategies. Based on the hypothesis that improved teaching strategies support Roma pupils' efforts to engage in class, networking among teachers and other members of staff is also suggested to positively impact on Roma pupils' educational outcomes.

## Impact of positive teachers' beliefs

Findings suggest that positive *teachers' beliefs* are an important factor in Roma pupils' success in the UK education system. This finding is also supported by prior studies (Gutman & Vorhaus, 2012; Haslinger, Kelly, & O'Lare, 1996) which suggest that a supportive atmosphere in school is a prerequisite for raising pupils' educational outcomes. The importance of considering teachers' beliefs is further emphasised by Theodorou's (2011) study, which illustrates the strong but often unknowing influence of teachers' beliefs on teaching practices.

Many teachers at Firth Park Academy can be characterised as very open and positive towards the Roma pupil cohort in school, which is indicated in their interview statements. For example, more than half of the interviewed teachers pointed out their enjoyment of teaching Roma pupils:

*“I really enjoy teaching them! Roma students can be challenging, but they are entertaining classes and I’ve built a good relationship with them... I am actually really satisfied with the present situation.” (Science Teacher B)*

In addition, some teachers’ statements expressed cultural tolerance and an actual refusal to think of the Roma pupil cohort as problematic in comparison to pupils from other ethnic groups:

*“You know, sometimes when they are walking down the corridors they are being noisy, singing, but I do not see that as a bad thing, this is just how young people are... So yes, I would not say that there are big differences between the Roma and other migrants, they are just like any other new cohort being new to the British school system.” (Science Teacher A)*

Further examples of supportive teachers’ beliefs are statements showing that, despite GRT pupils historically having a poor record of attainment and achievement (Office for Standards in Education, 2014), those at FPA demonstrate a positive attitude towards learning and working hard for their future:

*“I do not see the negative stories in the students I teach. My experience is that the kids want to get on, they have been offered an opportunity, they are thankful and grateful... they simply want to do something and get on in life.” (Music Teacher)*

*“Roma students work very hard and are happy to start college in the future.” (Careers Advisor)*

Finally, one teacher points out the importance of positive teacher beliefs’ towards Roma pupils in terms of their potential to impact positively on educational outcomes:

*“It is important that they realise that you appreciate them and enjoy working with them. Once you have earned that trust, they are working hard in lesson because they know that you care.” (Business Studies Teacher)*

Based on lesson observations and teacher interviews, findings suggest that positive teachers’ beliefs support teachers’ aims to raise Roma pupils’ educational outcomes. In summary, positive teachers’ beliefs towards the Roma pupil cohort play an important part in the school’s endeavour to close the attainment gaps between Roma pupils and their non-Roma peers.

## NTE classes as an intervention strategy

As already mentioned in the school profile (above), Firth Park Academy provides special NTE (New to English) classes for all EAL (English as an additional language) pupils entering school. The vast majority of pupils in these classes are Eastern European Roma. A majority of teachers and Roma pupils evaluated the implementation of NTE classes as positive. The implementation of NTE classes for the purpose of supporting English language acquisition of new arrivals is supported by Sime et al. (2014) who emphasise that newly arrived Roma children's positive educational outcomes are strongly linked to their development of English language skills.

Teachers' pointed out the need of Roma pupils' to learn basic English language skills before entering regular classes in order to be able to access the curriculum.

*"I think that the implementation of NTE classes was a good idea. There, pupils learn basic vocabulary, which makes it easier for us when they are sitting in regular classes." (Science Teacher)*

Interviewed Roma pupils who attended the NTE classes enjoyed being in class with other EAL pupils and said that they felt supported by their teachers. The fact that NTE classes were mainly supported by Roma speaking members of staff was also rated positively by the students who said that they could ask them for help, in case they did not understand English instructions, or needed additional support.

*"I like to be in this [NTE] class because I have a lot of friends here and the assistant can understand my language [Romani] so I can ask questions if I do not understand what to do." (Roma girl)*

Furthermore, the Roma pupils interviewed emphasised that the NTE classes made them feel secure to practise and improve their English skills because they attend the class together with their Roma friends who were in the same situation. In addition, they felt that NTE classes helped them to learn English quickly and to adequately prepare for the regular classes.

*"It is good because no one laughs at me when I make a mistake, because we are all the same, we are all learning. I can learn English here and after that I can go to the other classes." (Roma boy)*

Study findings show that NTE classes provide Roma pupils with an environment that both helps them to slowly adjust to the UK educational system and to acquire basic English language skills, securing their access to the curriculum after proceeding to regular classes. The findings suggest that NTE classes support Roma pupils in rapidly improving their English language skills after entry to FPA. Furthermore, the

implementation of NTE classes supports subject teachers more widely since it ensures that all pupils are 'school ready', that is, socialized into the ways of the Academy.

## Employment of members from the local Roma community

In response to the large influx of Roma pupils, Firth Park Academy decided to employ Roma speaking Teaching Assistants (TA) from the local Roma community to support members of staff with teaching, dealing with behavioural issues, and contacting families. Based on the findings of the study, as well as prior studies in this area (e.g. Padfield, 2005; Robinson & Martin, 2008) the employment of members from the local Roma community is suggested to positively support relationships between schools and families.

Study findings show that it is not always easy to establish relationships between schools and Roma communities. This is often caused by Roma parents' own prior negative experiences with education, which were often characterised by racism, segregation and a limited access to vocational training in Slovakia, as well as the historic persecution of the Roma going back centuries (Hancock, 2013). Cultural understanding and sensitivity towards the potential impact of these prior experiences on Roma parents' interest in engaging with the school can also be recognised in school staff statements:

*"I do understand that Roma families in general do not want to work with authority, because they have had bad experience throughout the centuries." (Support Officer)*

The potential negative effect of these experiences on the development of relationships between home and school was also mentioned by other studies (e.g. Derrington & Kendall, 2004; Kiddle, 1999).

Another reason brought forward by interviewed parents was that a difficult economic situation caused by, for example, unemployment, resulted in them having little interest in engaging with the school community, being entirely focused instead on finding a job to secure the family's survival:

*"I do not have time to worry about Z's school. I need to worry about finding a job very quickly. If I do not find a job, we have to leave." (Roma parent)*

However, all Roma parents interviewed considered it positive that the school employed members from the

local community and said that it made them trust the school. Interviewed families emphasised that they felt very positive about a Roma school staff member being their contact person at school, because they felt supported, understood and could communicate in their first language:

*“We like that D. [Roma support worker] gets into contact with us when there is a problem with school. We can talk to each other in our language and he also understands us because he is a member of our community.” (Roma parent)*

In conclusion, the study’s findings show that by employing Roma TAs in school, Firth Park Academy has built up trust and established a foundation for collaboration with the local Roma community in future.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, it can be said that Firth Park Academy shows some valuable examples of best practice and innovation in terms of educating newly arrived Roma pupils.

Teachers at Firth Park Academy flexibly adjust their teaching methods and curriculum planning to address Roma pupils’ needs, which is considered to impact positively on the pupils’ attainment and engagement in school.

Establishing intradepartmental and interdepartmental networking makes it possible for teachers to support each other through exchanging ideas, jointly developing teaching strategies, and to have a platform for discussing present issues and challenges experienced in teaching the Roma pupil cohort.

Firth Park Academy benefits from a positive school ethos towards the Roma pupil cohort, which is shared by many teachers in school. This can also be seen in the school’s efforts to acknowledge and celebrate Roma culture by dedicating one month a year to the Roma culture. Study findings show that these positive teachers’ beliefs have a beneficial impact on the school’s endeavours of raising the attainment and attendance of Roma pupils in school.

The establishment of NTE classes for all EAL pupils entering Firth Park Academy, which especially focus on supporting pupils to acquire basic English language skills, help Roma pupils to prepare themselves for regular classes and allows them to slowly adjust to the UK educational system.

Finally with the employment of Teaching Assistants from the local Roma community, Firth Park Academy

sent out a positive signal to Roma families and established a foundation for possible collaboration with the local Roma community in future. Employing extra staff to support the Roma pupils is a commitment taken by the school that falls outside of current budgetary provision and underlines the commitment by the school to ensuring all its pupils are adequately provided for.

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are considered to further facilitate Firth Park Academy's efforts to improve the attainment, attendance and inclusion of Roma pupils in school:

- ▶ Improving the integration of Roma pupils into the school community (e.g. establishing a buddy-system with non-Roma pupils)
- ▶ Expanding the collaboration of departments for the purpose of support: to exchange ideas, strategies (e.g. establishing monthly meetings within each department and across the departments to share ideas, discuss issues, concerns, etc.) and to address prevalent teachers' beliefs in school regarding the Roma pupil cohort, in order to reveal possible obstructive factors that counteract the school's efforts to raise Roma pupils' attainment.
- ▶ Improving school-home liaison and integrating Roma families into the school community by establishing events (e.g. monthly coffee mornings), or promoting adult evening classes through the help of the school staff from the local community. This way, parental support can be ensured in terms of Roma pupils' attainment and attendance in school. Furthermore, closer engagement with Roma parents could facilitate more involvement with the Careers advisory services. This way, parents would receive information about the options their children have after graduating from Firth Park Academy.
- ▶ The employment of a female TA from the community is strongly recommended: *"I think it is vital to have a female Roma TA"* (Careers advisor). A female Roma TA would act as a highly needed role model for female Roma pupils as well as a further Roma contact person for parents. The main tasks of a female TA would be to assist in Sex and Relationship Education as well as to act as a translator for the school's Careers Advice Service and to provide support in confidential counselling interviews with the school's Family Liaison Officer<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> N.B. A female Slovakian Roma Teaching Assistant has now been employed for the coming school year (2015-2016).

## Wider Recommendations for Schools

As stated in the introduction to this report, findings from this study are context specific to Firth Park Academy, Sheffield. The focus is firmly on the Roma pupils from Slovakia and their families, and the issues and challenges in welcoming them and settling them into school life at a thriving secondary Academy. That said, other practitioners in the field of education, particularly teachers and senior leaders in secondary schools working with the Slovakian and other Eastern European Roma may find that conclusions drawn in this report resonate with their own experiences.

In terms of generalizing our findings more widely to other schools, we would suggest that:

- ▶ Flexibility in curriculum planning, adapting lessons to consider and meet Roma pupils' needs and sharing good practices in this across schools and departments is key to facilitating positive outcomes for all Eastern European Roma children.
- ▶ Positive teachers' beliefs regarding the Roma have a beneficial impact on school efforts to raise attendance, attainment and achievements of all Eastern European Roma pupils.
- ▶ Formal English language support is vital to ensuring that all Roma pupils can access the wider curriculum and take a full part in school life. However, the Roma language and other languages such as Slovak/Czech etc. can play a key part in allowing pupils to feel valued, and to bridge understanding in lessons.
- ▶ Roma-speaking teaching assistants, both male and female, are important in maintaining home-school communications and for supporting pupils in terms of the curriculum and for providing positive role models.

In terms of the Slovakian Roma and generalizing from our understandings of this demographic to the Eastern European Roma more widely:

- ▶ The Roma from Eastern Europe often suffer due to poorer housing, social conditions, employment and educational opportunities. This can have an impact on health, educational engagement and family priorities which means some children have had truncated educational experiences.

- ▶ The Roma adults are often Romani speakers first, then Slovak/Czech/etc. as a second language (L2) and English as a third language. For pupils, this language mix can vary. Some Roma pupils have no Slovak or other Eastern European L2, especially if they were born in the UK. This can result in language issues; there is no standardized Romani dictionary that teachers can use.
- ▶ Eastern European Roma are settled in the UK but their first priority is employment and securing an income. This means that migration from or to other towns and cities can be very sudden. However, many Roma families have been settled in Sheffield for up to 10 years. During the summer months, many Roma families return to their countries of origin, which can have a detrimental impact on pupils' English language skills.



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