

Social Issues

Health

Due to poor health provision and living conditions in home countries, some Roma families may not be aware of the health and dental care available to them in the UK. Students may arrive with oral and other health issues - it is important to work with families sensitively to support them in accessing health care.

Health, especially mental health, can be a taboo subject with some Roma families, so it is important to be sensitive and build up trust in these situations.

Poverty

Many Roma families are large and some may have very low or no income. In their home countries, they are likely to have lived in sub-standard accommodation in difficult conditions. Newly-arrived Roma are likely to be living in financially difficult situations, they may not initially have a NI number and students may not have the basics such as warm coats, etc.. It is important to be sensitive to this and provide students with equipment such as pens, pencils, etc.. If Roma students are living in poverty, they are unlikely to explain this to you unless you have built a trusting relationship with them. Organisations like Compas can support families in how to access financial support and official documentation needed to gain employment.

Sexual Health / Relationships

Sexual health is also a taboo subject, although it is not unheard of for Roma students to marry very young (as early as 14 / 15 years old) and have children before the legal age of consent and a small number of Roma marry within their wider family group (i.e. cousins / 2nd cousins, etc..). It is important to note that the legal age for marriage in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania is 18.

Tips for Educating

Roma

It is important to build trusting relationships with Roma students and families:

- Be friendly, supportive and empathic.
- Roma will want to hide weaknesses (in any aspect), therefore sensitive questioning is important. Students may display bad behaviour in an attempt to cover educational gaps.
- Try to use verbal communication with hard to reach parents and understand that some parents may not be able to read or write.
- Use open, relaxed body language and eye contact.
- Understand that some Roma may not have access to financial support, so be sensitive when demanding equipment, etc..
- Use a Roma translator and try to use the same members of staff when meeting with parents, this will build trust and encourage parents to engage with school.
- If you are a younger teacher, it may take longer to build trust, as Roma tend to trust their elders more than younger people.
- As many Roma will be unfamiliar with the UK education system and students may have significant gaps in their home language education, it is important to assess students carefully and provide support as necessary.
- Although Roma often appear very confident in social situations, they can lack confidence and self-esteem in more formal settings. It is important to help them to believe in their own



The Roma Community – Advice for Educators



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This information is produced to help teachers and educational staff to support Roma students and families.

Who are the Roma?

Roma are the largest ethnic minority in Europe with many European Roma migrating from countries like Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia and the former Yugoslavia. In Peterborough, there are established groups of Roma from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as a growing number of Roma from Romania.

Although Czech and Slovak Roma tend to declare their Roma heritage at school admission interviews, Romanian Roma are reluctant to declare, this is likely due to past experiences of discrimination.

Origins and History

The Romani people, also referred to as Roma, Sinti or Sindhi, or Kale, are an **Indo-Aryan** ethnic group, who live primarily in Europe. They originated in northwest regions of the Indian subcontinent (Punjab and Rajasthan) and left sometime between the 6th and 11th century, travelling through Asia to Europe and later to the Americas. For centuries they maintained a nomadic lifestyle but were forced to settle under the communist regimes of Eastern Europe.

Throughout history, Roma have faced centuries of discrimination, persecution and forced assimilation. Even now in many countries, Roma remain marginalised, experiencing barriers to employment, education and health and social services.

Roma first came to the UK as asylum seekers, but since the expansion of the EU have been arriving as economic migrants.

Language

Most Roma students are already bilingual, speaking a Roma language at home with family as well as being fluent in their previous home language (Czech, Slovak, etc.). There are a number of different Roma dialects depending on their heritage, e.g. Sinti Roma, Kale Roma, etc. and often Roma from different countries / areas speak different dialects.

Education

Prior Experience

Many Roma will have experienced institutionalised racism in their home country and may have been sent to a 'special school' simply because of their ethnicity, or been educated in Roma settlements where the quality of provision is likely to be very low. Additionally, many Roma are highly mobile and may have moved country or area a number of times before arriving at your school. In Peterborough, for example, many Romanian Roma arrive via other European Countries such as Greece or Italy.

Education – Strengths

Working with Roma students can be incredibly rewarding:

- Roma are very family and community orientated. Older children often care for their younger brothers and sisters and they are extremely good at sharing, even when they have very little themselves.
- Due to their mobility, they are often very flexible and versatile.
- Roma are often very confident in social situations, they are also very creative and have a love of music and folklore.
- Roma students respond very well to rewards and a warm, friendly environment.

Challenges

- Roma students will often arrive in the UK having experienced a sub-standard or fractured education. This means that they will often have gaps in their development, for example, they are likely to struggle with reading, handwriting, grammar and basic numeracy. As educators, we need to understand their prior experience and create opportunities for success. Roma students will not want to show their weaknesses and may mask gaps in knowledge with disruptive behaviour – it is important not simply to sanction the behaviour, but also to investigate the cause and provide support.
- Another challenge is that some Roma parents may have very low levels of literacy or even be illiterate, and they often lack English language skills and rely on their children to translate. Due to the discrimination experienced in their home countries, parents are often intimidated and reluctant to engage with schools or attend educational courses for fear of intimidation or negative repercussions. Having a Roma member of staff who can translate for you and liaise with parents is hugely beneficial. In Peterborough, QKA and The Beeches employ Roma staff and Compas Charity have a number of staff who could be called upon to support.
- Many Roma parents lack faith and understanding of the value of education due to the lack of employment opportunities for Roma in their home countries. This view can be passed down to students, therefore, as educators, we need to ensure that we raise educational awareness and aspirations, ensuring that both students and parents understand that there are no cultural barriers to achievement and employment in the UK.