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Working with Roma/traveller Young People

Written by George Dura, September 2020

Introduction

At Musinc, we have been running an open access music group for the past two years at Breckon Hill Community Centre in Middlesbrough, in partnership with Breckon Hill Youth Club. The young people that attend the youth club, and music group are predominantly from the Roma community, and we have faced many challenges over the years with engagement, despite the majority of the young people having an innate musical ability and enthusiasm for the music of their culture.

The challenges we have faced have been in the following areas:

- Commitment: not showing up to sessions and/or performances
- Concentration/focus: easily distracted after a few minutes and jumping from instrument to instrument
- Taking guidance from music leaders: lack of interest in being guided and supported by music leaders, and therefore restricting progression.
- Aspiration: lack of belief that they have life choices i.e. lack of ability to 'break' away from the cultural traditions that often pre-determine their life pathway.

Therefore, in an effort to understand the background, context and circumstances which may contribute to the challenges above, we asked George Dura, a music leader for our programme who is also a talented musician, warden for Middlesbrough, youth worker and native Romanian what his views were on this.

This article was written by George in answer to a series of our questions:

“Through my long journeys across Europe I have managed to talk to a lot of people along the years Roma and non-Roma, so I've managed to form myself a opinion regarding this subject.”

“I hope that this article will help you and all of us to understand better the existent differences between this two segments of our society, because both of these, build the Middlesbrough where we all live and work. “

“I want to state from the beginning that it's not my intention to hurt anyone's feelings by writing this article and I am just an observer who wants to describe the situation, the reality of the society in which we all live just as it is from my point of view.”

N.B. The term ‘Gypsy’ is referred to often within this article. The writer uses this term in relation to observations about how this term has been used historically, and how it is used in various ways within global society today. It is worth pointing out that in the UK census of 2011, the term ‘Gypsy’ was included in the list of nationalities, and that 58,000 people identified themselves as Gypsy.

“Can you explain the background and definition of the term ‘Roma’?”

Roma people are an ethnic group, originating from Northern India and known for their nomadic lifestyle. They now live across Europe and are frequently incorrectly given the name ‘Gypsies’ by western Europeans. I will explain more about this later on.

“Can you explain a little more about the values and beliefs that underpin the Roma ways?”

“I would start by saying that Roma as a population have a certain set of unwritten values and rules. I have to state that most of the time they behave and act according to these in the wider society.

Because of the discrimination and racism enduring in the last centuries they have the tendency to separate from the natives and use the term "gadjo" for all non-roma people. They build their own "society" and this is a common thing throughout the continent as well as trying not to mix too much with the majority.

“Middlesbrough is well known to have a large population of Roma, can you explain a bit more about this with your knowledge of Middlesbrough?”

We have 3 big Roma (Gypsy) communities in our town; English Roma, Czech Roma and Romanian Roma. The English one, which is probably not the biggest in Middlesbrough but the most important (the oldest one here in this area). It's a very interesting thing about

these guys that they don't mix or speak with the Czech or Romanian Gypsies. Or possibly they don't want to build relationships with other gypsies but we will have to determine this after we have more facts. Most English Roma, except some older ones, don't speak Romani/gypsy language or understand it, and are not interested in developing relations with the other communities or with the 'gadjo's' (native white British population).

Then we have the Czech Roma Community. I would say is the second largest one. Most, if not all of them, do speak and understand Romani language, and have limited English language skills. They don't like to mix with the 'gadjo's' either and try to stay away as much as they can from the wider society. They don't have great relationships with the English Roma but fortunately they do speak with some of the Romanian Roma Community.

Probably the largest Roma community in Middlesbrough at this time is the Romanian one. Some of them do speak and understand Romani language, and some of them speak Romanian language rather than Roma. It was forbidden under the communist regime to speak any language other than Romanian. There are no relations between the Romanian and English gypsies communities at this moment and only few of the Romanian Roma have Czech Roma friends.

The sad thing is that at this moment we don't really have a good engagement between these three Roma communities in Middlesbrough.

“Tell us more about how Roma’s came to be in Europe and the political history which surrounds some preconceptions that western people have about travellers”

I believe that more effort needs to be made to educate the majority (white British population mostly but not only them) about these culturally rich people. This is a diverse, vibrant society with a lot of customs and traditions and many of them are not disclosed or no one talks about them. At the same time and for the past four, five centuries Gypsies were persecuted, underrepresented, and not understood by the white population as an ethnic group, and were most commonly referred to as delinquents. Roma people are thought to have originated in Northern India. After leaving India, the Roma population, because we are a nation without a country, travelled west and were met by hostile Europeans, and so became nomadic due to persecution.

Although many Roma are settled today and live all over the world, discrimination, hate crimes, and racism are still present. On the other hand 'Travellers', sometimes known as "Tinkers," according to U.K writers are also historically and traditionally a nomadic population and in our present times suffer the same stigma and oppression that Roma and Gypsy suffer;

But we have to distinguish between these terms: Gypsy, Roma and Travellers because Travellers are of Irish ethnic origin and have their own culture and language and tend to live in Ireland and the U.K.

A very important thing that we have to state and be clear about: this word GYPSY, does not exist in Romani or Traveller language. It is an invented notion, a term, to define the Roma population and if you are Romani or Traveller, you are free to claim or use, or not the word *Gypsy* as you see fit.

In the past 4 or 5 centuries the word *Gypsy* became a racial term and we even have anti-gypsy words which have been normalized in many languages in Europe. Inappropriate terms and words describing Gypsy, Roma and Travellers include "Gypsy," „Gyppo," "Gyp," and for Irish Travellers terms like "Pikey" and "Knacker."

Gypsy is often used by gadje and has a pejorative sense to describe anything occult, sexual, or criminal. This only adds to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and implies that "being a Gypsy" is a lifestyle choice, but no one says that this is not a state of mind or spirit. We are talking about a population, a nation with its own language and even alphabet. This is a very important and problematic issue considering the current global trend about Gypsy, Roma and Travellers human rights crisis. In spite of all this ,nowadays some of the Roma and Travellers choose to use this term "*Gypsy* "as an act of linguistic and identity manifesto, whereas some Roma, especially the older ones, prefer to call themselves "*Gypsy*" as an old discriminating habit.

"Tell us more about how the Roma society is organised"

When 2 Roma meet each other, regardless of context or location, they will always ask each other:

"Rom san amala?" translated - "Are you Roma my friend?" They will not ask each other: "Gypsy san?" translated would be: " Are you Gypsy?". This word ROM is the pillar of the entire Romani society. The sense of this word explains the order in the Roma society as well.

First is the MAN, the roof of the house, the watch dog of the Roma society. It has many meanings, as a man of the house, husband, brother, friend. The man equals the Roma society and it's the essence and everything is about HIM and everything around it is made and created for HIM. The Roma society is built and has his grounds on what the MAN (O ROM) can do for his family, others, friends, relatives. It is patriarchal.

It is difficult to explain and much easier to live it, to live in, to breath it. To be able to understand the whole meaning you have to live inside this world. We express our feelings and have different words to declare our love towards our girlfriends, wives, sisters, brothers and family. The most important thing next, are the CHILDREN and unfortunately the WOMEN are the last.

What are the main cultural/lifestyle differences between White British and Roma communities?"

This question is a question like every other, but with a very complex answer and to be able to provide guidance regarding this subject you have to understand both sides. I was fortunate enough to experience this in Romania, the Netherlands and UK. You can answer this question in one phrase or ten, the difference is the life experience that you have gained over the years.

In order to understand better the picture we should ask ourselves first if there are any differences between these two segments of our society and what can we do to create the right social climate in order to help ourselves and build a better environment for all.

I will divide this question in four and we will have: cultural differences, educational, health and employability. It is worth noting however that for me all aspects are a whole and you have to take it together to be able to understand what is happening around us, today in Middlesbrough. I will answer backwards in order to get to the final conclusion.

Employability:

Most of the Roma and Gypsy Travellers choose to come to the UK. Unfortunately they don't have a good knowledge of the English language and therefore they know that it will be hard to get a job here. When you can't secure a job in order to take care of your family then you have to accept any job to be able to support your loved ones. Many times this type of job will make you ill (health considerations)

Education:

Education is not considered a very important aspect of life because it can't provide you an immediate answer to your problems being a Roma, Gypsy or a Traveller. As a result we have tensions and conflicts within our communities.

The question is: Is it alright to have cultural differences? It's great I think. That's why Middlesbrough is a good place to be, because you have all this ethnic mix, but only to a certain extent.

It is very easy to *talk* about difference, but very hard to *make* a difference, but with our work in MUSINC and LINX we are trying our best to help everyone Roma or Non-Roma.

In western societies people are very aware of themselves and the emphasis is more and more on "I", as an individual and what "I" can do to help myself. Personal needs and attitudes are more important than the others and have a great impact on their behaviour within society. More and more in the last 20 to 30 years from what I have observed is the concept of autonomy and self-sufficiency are valued and the interest of "I" prevails before the group. That's why the Roma communities are different because they have another structure and are built as whole. The overall structure is most important and the individual is just a small component which plays it's part.

The ROMANICHAL, which is the unwritten Bible of the Roma communities states very clearly that the group will always be more important than the individual because we couldn't exist as individuals, being most of the time persecuted and discriminated and forced to live outside the borders of the society. That's why the family and the community are the stepping stones of any Roma and the most valuable thing for them.

The white British on the other hand have a smaller family, the ties between the members are loose and the concept of an extended family was lost in the last decades because I have asked around me, spoke with my colleagues and people have told me that 20, 30 years ago it was usual to have a Sunday dinner to see almost all of your extended family in Grandma's house (which, by the way I think is a great thing to do). This means that later on in life when it's time to build their own family, feelings play the most important part inside the newly formed couple i.e. the focus is on their relationship to each other, and the wider family has only a consultative role and not a decisive one. Unfortunately the divorce rate in the UK is higher than inside the Roma communities where you can't just decide by yourself when it comes to family, divorce, children and so on. A couple's feelings towards each other don't play such an important role when a young couple decide to marry. There are other things to take into consideration when the Community decides what's the best for their members.

In the UK, people are encouraged to engage in many activities - sometimes with others or most of time by yourself and so the social interaction is shorter and doesn't have the "deepness" to create strong bonds between the individuals despite being more frequent.

Inside Roma communities people are a group and they are aware of the obligations that they have towards the other Roma, they are integrated into a strong structure and understand their role within it. Extended families with uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents provide protection on exchange for unquestioning support and loyalty. Shared living is a common practice. They prefer group activities, interaction which is longer and more frequent and the main goal is HARMONY.

The British society and most of the western societies focus on practical activities, on doing things with the most immediate effect for their individuals because they believe that people can do whatever they want with their lives, control their destiny and most of the individuals can succeed and can be successful if they work hard and put enough effort into what they do.

Roma society thinks that you can try as hard as you want, however if DESTINY and GOD will not allow you, you will never achieve your goals. The most important thing is to live in the moment, today, as we never know if we will have a tomorrow. You can't do whatever you want, only things that will benefit your community as a whole. Nothing is urgent, everything can wait, even the appointments to the GP. That's why the NHS and the system loses a lot of money. The life expectancy inside the Roma community is very low according to studies made by European Union.

The UK society believes in direct change and encourage individuals to work and shape their society according to their needs and goals. Generally speaking in White British society people have a "can-do" attitude and entrepreneurial spirit are very important, appreciated and receive public recognition for their achievements. Education and a good set of practical skills are very important to success and it is the key to abundance, as well as continuous training and development which is welcomed and recommended during your career. You have to be willing to take and play your part in this type of society where stress and

performance are important factors and leads to innovation and improvement. Time is a very important and valued resource because almost everything has to happen now, as soon as possible, every matter is urgent and has to be fixed NOW, otherwise the competition will take over.

In comparison, Roma society it's not so concerned about changing things around, it's rather how to fit in with the world as it is because they never had the opportunity or the chance to modify things or to take part or play a part in the building of the future. That's why most, but not all, choose to come to UK. They are trying to understand the societies where they live and not to change or interfere directly or indirectly with the other individuals. Being persecuted and discriminated for centuries has obliged them to stand aside and try just to survive. That's why important things like peace, unity, protecting the nature are very important values for the Roma, Gypsy and Travellers.

Members of the Roma community have a real concern about quality of life and I'm not talking here specifically about the ones from Middlesbrough, it is a general concern for all the Roma's throughout Europe. The emphasis is on NOW, that it's more important to live in the moment and to enjoy your time, your life. It's not all the time about a career because the most important thing is the FAMILY. If you can secure the resources with minimum effort and still have time to enjoy, have your friends close to you, and all the others from the group then this is more than enough.

Having said all of this, it needs to be said that no cultural group can be seen as a whole and not all the time the individuals inside the ethnic group behave according to the norm and in the last decades more and more cultural values do not allow us to predict the behaviour or the responses of the individuals, yet we can still build a working pattern or knowledge of how an isolated society or how members of a cultural group in general act or think or behave. This can provide a very important and useful starting point from where we can observe and take appropriate action to interact and try to discover and build a plan for intercultural connections.

The solution is to mix and try to encourage both societies to interact as much as we can through as many activities and projects we like e.g football, music, food. We all have cultural assumptions and stereotypes but we really have to experiment and try to seek possible solutions and answers for real inclusion.

What are Roma communities' views around education and careers?

We have different opinions and points of view from different Roma communities when it comes to this subject. I could say, even if it sounds a bit strange, that we are talking about 2 separate things. I mean, if you are the the boy who later on will become the man and the husband, they barely have time for a job and most of the time it's a national minimum wage one, poorly paid. You don't have time, or you cannot afford a career because it requires a lot of work and time to acquire a career, too much effort to put into, because the family it's big

usually and when I say a big family for Czech or Romanian Roma it's like this: usually you have the parents and 3 or 4 children, grandparents and possibly an auntie or an uncle and most of the time they live together in one household. In the Romanian Roma families you can even find from 5 to 8 or 9 children. So, who has time for a career or who can afford a good education for their children?

Being a migrating population, fortunately the Czech, Slovak and Romanian Roma choose to come to the UK where the society and the government offers a lot of help to children if they want to attend school compared with the former Eastern European communist countries where you have to pay for everything, starting with the books and ending with the pencils and the wages are ridiculously low. So, not everyone can afford to go to school in Czech, Slovakia and Romania. Sometimes not even the white population. This is the reality unfortunately. With regards to the Roma population from UK, most of the time they don't consider that education or a career is the key to success or wellbeing for their children or future families.

Do parents support the idea of young people getting an education to improve their life prospects?

I have to state that a very important factor for Roma communities is marriage. The fact that most of the children get into partnerships at young age and a teenager who's not a man yet has to be able to provide all the things in a short period of time for his new family. That's why the parents in the Roma families take their children from a very young age with them to all sorts of fayres, teaching them to sell, trade, swap things, horses, cars, caravans.

As a girl most of the time you are not encouraged to study, to go to school and get a good education, to be able to form yourself as an individual for the future sake of the society where you live. And as a girl it's more difficult because your parents have to be able to support and help you with the living costs during your studies. There are families where parents advise the children to pursue a career and acknowledge the importance of a good education for their future and at the same time there are families where a good education or a career is not seen as a priority unfortunately.

Most of the time Roma parents teach their children that commerce and trading it's the key to achieve a good standard of life and the way to gain the respect of the community.

You have mentioned that Roma communities feel excluded from society due to significant cultural and lifestyle differences. Can you explain a bit more about this?

I will explain some of the aspects contained by the Roma community regarding their will to be integrated in the UK society. So I've said that some of the Roma communities feel like they are excluded from the UK society and by the human society generally speaking as we know it, with its norms and laws and rules.

For example the Romanian Roma community from Middlesbrough, do they feel excluded from the UK society? From the language point of view yes, they feel excluded, definitely. Do they get help with the language barrier? Yes, or most authorities are trying to do their best to get someone in to help with the interpreting and translation side of it.

If it would be to talk about exclusion from the job market, the answer would be no, they are not excluded. But because of the language barrier it's not easy for them to get a job. ESOL classes take a lot of time, it's not time efficient because they need jobs to be able to support their families. I've made a suggestion in regards to this subject - functional English classes after work. No longer than 6 weeks, basic notions to help Roma people to get those jobs as production operatives, because most of them get into these kinds of jobs. Lack of education and support leads to exclusion anyway, especially when you are a Roma, Gypsy or Traveller. This is my personal opinion.

Speaking about inclusion in terms of the NHS, they are really struggling and put a lot of effort and resources into helping everyone who needs it. I can tell you this because I have been, on some occasions, part of the chain in making appointments or accompanying Roma and Gypsy or Travellers to various NHS locations in Middlesbrough. Most of the time the NHS do succeed to get someone who can interpret and help for every appointment. Anyway I think the NHS is one of best services in terms of non-discriminating, racism and other horrible things which can happen to you if you are a Roma and really helps anyone in need, even myself I've helped on some occasions with the translation and interpretation part. The Surgeries and the GP's are really committed to help everyone as much as they can and integrate the Roma population as they have in the past with other communities.

From the educational point of view I can say that most of the schools, primaries, secondary's or colleges are trying their best as well to integrate the Roma students. Most of them do a great job and really help to improve the image of the school in the eyes of the Roma population. Some of the families acknowledge the importance of a good education as an important step to integration in the UK society and the Romanian and the Czech Roma families register their children in schools. At the same time the unusual thing is that I don't know many English Roma children who attend school and even the parents are not so keen to mix with the others, not even with the Czech or Romanian Roma so I could say that as a conclusion: If the Czech and Romanian Roma's are willing more or less to make an effort to integrate in the UK society, I don't know what to think about the English Gypsies because from the discussions I've had with them in the past they are not so keen to be part of the British society.

Are the Roma communities happy to be left alone? We have 3 distinct Roma communities in Middlesbrough and I will try to answer separately for each one of them.

I think most of them are, not because they don't want be a part of the UK society or don't want to contribute but because most of them think that in this society there is too much freedom. Roma and Gypsy, traditionally speaking, is a conservative society, especially the Romanian Roma but they are not closing the gates or the communication channels. If you have someone to explain to them how and what to do they are willing to make some concessions :))

When it comes Czech Roma they are already developing some of the UK society characteristics. The families, the children, the girls which in the past were more conscious and conservative and this kind of thing. This change is not seen as a good thing by the elders. If you speak with the youth workers they will be able to provide more details regarding their behaviour.

Only the ones that are able and young enough to understand and experiment within this society will be willing to really integrate. Unfortunately this process will take a lot of time and effort and we will not see a change overnight. It will involve efforts from both sides and its like this every time when you want to progress. The surprise is that if you can somehow relate to Romanian and Czech Roma when it comes to change and integration into UK society I don't understand what is happening with the English Roma and Gypsies and why are they so reticent to change because they have the language, the culture and all the tools they need.

Most of the time, traditional societies or communities like the Roma don't take or adopt the type of relations or the structure of that society that they find in the location where they emigrate and anything and everything will be relative because they are a nomadic population and it's very hard to make them settle.

In conclusion, how can UK education sector and other support networks (youth services etc) operate differently or be better at supporting the engagement of Roma young people?

First of all you have to know that due to the fact that Roma, Gypsy and Traveller communities are in continuous movement across all the UK and Europe, the best way to support them would be to have youth workers on the ground, always ready for outdoor activities during the summer and engaging in the winter because most of the youths that I have worked with, they get bored very quickly and you always have to find new ways to capture their attention. At the same time I have the Romanian and Czech Roma children constantly asking me, every time when they see me, "when can we start coming again for the youth provision in Newport and Breckon Hill?"

We have to be more mobile, prepared to go on foot if we want to see changes and one weekly session is not enough because all these children need a lot more. More activities and a lot more often, and they need to be diverse and creative. It doesn't help anyone if all the youth projects are taking place indoors during the summer holidays, we as youth workers we have to be ready to create things together with the children in the parks, play ground areas and other similar places like that.

Second of all, I have just participated in a joint operation with my colleagues from Middlesbrough Council and School Readiness Team in regards to the subject of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children and their presence and attendance in school from this September. As

I told you earlier on at the beginning of this article, due to the fact that this is a mobile, traveling community, most of them go back to their home countries during the summer holidays and it's hard if not almost impossible to monitor this movement between UK and Europe. Most of the time if they return at the beginning of September, it won't be to the same house, if they return at all. Most of them usually they do, but it's not a given. In order to monitor and to solve this problem you have to know the community, they have to know you, you have to gain their trust, build a relationship with the children and parents. You will ask me how? The only way is to be on foot again, because it doesn't matter if they change address/house, the only thing that matters is if they got the chance to know you during the school term, if you had any kind of common activities with them and the school. It will take you time but Middlesbrough is not Manchester and the Roma communities are pretty much in the same vicinity, so it is not impossible. Of course maybe sometimes the problem with the language barrier will exist but you can always find someone who will be able to help with translation to the parents because most of the time they are the ones that don't have a good level of English.

You ask what we need to do differently to support engagement with Roma young people? The answer is simply to get to know them, and meet them regularly in their own communities. Spend time building relationships and trust by getting out of the office and onto the streets, into the youth clubs. This way you can join them for 30 minutes and talk to them, explain to them why attendance and education is so important for their future families and careers.

*this was correct at the time of writing, however since then, some funding has been confirmed for youth sessions to run with Linx and Breckon Hill in Middlesbrough.

Top tips on working with Roma and traveller young people:

- Allow time
 - Be patient, it takes time to build trust. Be consistent in your attendance/punctuality to set an example and expect for/plan for sporadic attendance at first.
- Provide a variety of activities
 - Plan for, and expect, to move from one activity to the next and keep the session fast paced.
- Re-enforce the values of education and learning
 - However, be careful not to de-value or criticise other, more traditional Roma lifestyle choices.
 - Explain why education and learning are important to UK society without attempting to 'convert'.
- Get to know them
 - Make an effort to find out what's important to them and their families

- Family first
 - Remember and understand that Roma priorities in life are usually centred around family, and roles within the family structure, so young people may not have autonomy to make decisions about their future in the same way British young people might be able to.
- Understanding cultural differences
 - Don't assume they want to change their ways to integrate into UK society. Instead, explain where the UK values and ways of life have come from and let them make their own judgements
 - Typically, Roma people are not motivated by having a successful career, or improving society and the world they live in, in the same way that UK people might be, because family, and living in the moment, is enough.
- Involve family if possible.
 - As mentioned, family comes first, so as much family involvement as possible is going to be a good thing.
- Don't pressure to commit
 - Understand that in the eyes of the young person, they may not see any point in committing because they may be moving shortly
- Consider an interpreter where possible
 - Try to seek out a music leader who can speak either Romanian, Czech or ideally Romani (gypsy) language, or a little of all of these.