

Quick Information Guides for Educators

SNAPSHOT No 11

High Ability and the Travelling Community



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There are distinct traveller communities, each with their own histories, cultural traditions and values and it is important to recognise and value each distinct community. Different mobile cultures include, for example, Gypsy/Traveller, European and Showpeople families. Within these communities different skills and abilities are valued and celebrated. As in, for example, first nation communities, high ability may be understood differently within these communities from the dominant view within settled communities. Understanding and supporting highly able pupils from mobile cultures may mean that we have to broaden our definition of high ability taking into account that young people are capable of rapidly adapting their identities according to the context in which they find themselves (Van Blerk 2005). Michelle Schweisfurth (2013) talks about the importance of contextualised pedagogy and if we can successfully identify highly able pupils in these communities we may then need to be creative in finding the best ways to develop supportive pedagogy. A better understanding of what it means to be highly able within mobile communities will help us to better support all highly able young people in their learning given the importance of contextualised learning.

A Right to Education

Enshrined in Scottish legislation is the duty placed on each authority to have due regard for the “right of every child of school age to be provided with school education by, or by virtue of arrangements made, or entered into, by, an education authority” (Scottish Government, 2002). The Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act (2004; 2009) also places a duty on authorities to “develop the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential”. Within the context of the Traveller community, a Traveller child or young person’s entitlement to school education therefore by law cannot be affected by their family’s mobility.

Families from mobile cultures have said that they would like others to respect their cultural traditions, routines and values. Cultural awareness is crucial if trust is to be built between the community and the teacher. It is important that all staff in the school have thought about mobile communities so that there is a shared understanding about the community from which the young people come. This can help to ensure stereotypical views are

challenged and learning opportunities reflect this cultural understanding. In the context of high ability, schools need to think what this means for learning and the links to formal education. It is also important that all staff have time to reflect on high ability within their subject area and what this might mean for young people from mobile communities.

STEP, a project that works with the Travelling community and offers support to schools and Local Authorities offers six dimensions of learning for young people from mobile cultures <http://www.step.education.ed.ac.uk/making-learning-relevant/>

These provide a useful starting point in thinking about how we can best support highly able young people from mobile communities.

Supporting highly able young people from mobile communities

Cultural relevance

For many in the travelling community “going to school” is seen as something different from learning. There are many skills and abilities that are valued within the community and at which the young person might excel. Learning opportunities that value these skills and abilities and takes account of them will help the young person to better understand their abilities and themselves. This can happen on two levels. Learning in school can incorporate the skills valued within the community and school learning that happens at home can involve the whole family or peer group.

Creativity

From the research it is known that creative activities can engage young people from the travelling community. Many of the popular models of high ability include creativity as an indicator. Characteristics that creative, highly able learners might display include:

- thinks independently
- tells or writes original stories
- comes up with multiple innovative solutions to problems
- has a great sense of humour
- is inventive
- is imaginative
- has a talent for improvisation
- enjoys being different
- can be seen as inattentive
- works well on his/her own schedule
- can be a risk taker

Looking out for young people who display these characteristics and devising activities that harness and develop these characteristics will be beneficial, not only for young people from the Travelling community, but for all creative highly able learners.

Relevant and transferable skills

Working with families from the Traveller community will help schools to better understand the kind of activities that will be relevant and engaging for highly able children from the Traveller community. As with other aspects of education, communication is key when thinking about relevant and transferable skills. Literacy rates among some adults in Traveller communities can be low. If, for example, the young person is a highly proficient reader then working with the young person and their family to think about how this impacts on shared family literacy will help all those involved to better understand each other's views. STEP offers practical advice on how to develop effective programmes with families <http://www.step.education.ed.ac.uk/family-literacy-tp/> This is a good starting point for discussions with parents about their child's high ability. As with all proficient readers, sourcing appropriately challenging texts that link to the young person's world will develop their literacy abilities while helping them to gain a sense of "who they are". Finding out what literacy skills will be useful in the home environment will also help to make links between school learning and home learning.

Ownership

Within mobile cultures, young people will often be responsible for aspects of family life at an earlier age than those in settled communities. Young people will have gained many skills and abilities that they can bring to the formal learning situation in school. As with all learners, offering a sense of ownership over learning is powerful. Giving highly able young people tools to manage their learning, and to manage their learning during times of mobility, will be particularly important. There are many ways to do this but the Thinking Actively in A Social Context (TASC) wheel is one way of helping young people to organise their learning.



This approach has its roots in problem solving and thinking skills development and as such it can be used with the young people and their families to plan for learning. The “let’s tell someone” stage of this process offers great opportunities for young people return to school. Sharing their experiences with their teachers and peers will help to link school and home learning. If the whole class were to adopt this approach, the sharing could be two-way thus developing shared understandings of learning in different settings and across time.

✿ Flexibility

Flexibility is crucial if learning is to be maintained and flexibility has to be built into periods of mobility. Working together with the young person to think about the “school learning” that might feasibly take place during these periods will ensure that realistic goals are set. Flexibility in what is considered to be high ability will allow for a deeper understanding of how school and mobile communities can engage and work together to support young people. This flexibility will also better allow the potential identification of highly able underachievers who may not be able to demonstrate their abilities in standard ways.






✿ Multimodality

We live in an increasingly multi-modal society. For example, moving images are a huge part of our culture, and young people learn intuitively to read this information. The Moving Image Education project describes the ‘3Cs’ of media literacy: 1. Cultural access, 2. Critical understanding, and, 3. Creative activity (<https://movingimageeducation.org/>). As you plan and work with highly able young people from mobile communities consider how you can use a range of media to identify, engage and challenge. Oral, visual and digital opportunities can all be used to challenge, inspire and enhance the learning experience. Complexity of text and task will help to provide appropriate challenge.

The six dimensions of learning combine to offer a framework of support for all learners. When using the framework within the context of high ability, selecting appropriate material that takes account of pupils' interests, abilities and culture will be a key component of ensuring culturally relevant learning experiences. Like any other highly able young person, pupils from mobile communities need to have access to carefully planned learning experiences.

In Summary

Things to remember

-  It is important to value the traditions and customs of mobile communities
-  Patterns of movement will be different for different groups
-  Learning is understood as something different from “going to school”
-  Creating challenging learning opportunities that involve the family and peers is most likely to be effective
-  Supporting highly able young people from mobile communities will help schools to support all highly able young people

References

- Schweisfurth, M (2013) *Learner-Centred Education in International Perspective: Whose Pedagogy for Whose Development?* London: Routledge.
- Van Blerk, L., 2012. Berg-en-See street boys: merging street and family relations in Cape Town, South Africa. *Children's Geographies* 10 (3), 321–336

