



'Tutors for GRT' – challenging digital exclusion

Case study for HEAR - Equality and Human Rights Network

'Tutors for GRT' project was born in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic that resulted in school closures and parents having to home school their children for months. From years of experience doing education casework with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) families, we knew that home schooling would be difficult for many GRT parents because of digital exclusion and low literacy levels.

To illustrate some of the barriers when working with GRT clients, our caseworkers often spent whole summers filling out online school Admission and travel support forms because our clients didn't have computers or the digital skills to fill in online forms themselves. Most Local Authorities had not provided or offered help in filling the forms for those who needed it.

'Tutors for GRT' project is inclusive of every GRT family regardless of their access to tablets, laptops/computers and printers or the quality of their internet connection. Every tutoring relationship is tailored to the child's needs, using a variety of methods such as workbooks being sent, fiction books (copies to both tutor and tutee to help with only having a small mobile screen to work with) as well as storytelling and journaling.

Currently tutoring starts on Whatsapp as this is the easiest method for parents and does not require any special equipment, email addresses or logins. Some families have since moved on to zoom or google hangouts, but for many this isn't possible. Although not ideal in the long run, we have mitigated the safeguarding issues with



Whatsapp as best we can, and the simplicity of our tutoring has been a main driver of its success.

Privacy/Safeguarding considerations

- The project only accepts tutors who are DBS checked
- Every tutor has to fill in and sign a Volunteer Agreement, GDPR Statement and a GDPR Data Processor Agreement
- Parents contact us via Facebook, Twitter or Instagram inbox, or referred by family and friends
- Introduction meeting between tutor and family always with one of the project workers present
- Tutoring happens using parents' phones, a parent will be present while tutoring happens
- Examples and quotes used in this case study will be anonymised, no one can recognise the child, parent or tutor in question
- Going forward we will fundraise so we can design an easy access tutoring platform that will have more robust safeguarding measures in place (tutors and children will only interact via the platform)

How does digital exclusion impact online tutoring, feedback from the tutors:

- Because I can't share my screen, it is so much harder to provide examples of work for the child to view, which is an important part of learning.



- I can't share all the learning material available online to the child – we can't view videos or animations, to use internet resources or draw pictures.
- It has made it more difficult to know what the child is doing and how well they are understanding the work because it is hard for them to show you their work via a phone camera
- I am not able to support the child in accessing online work that their peer group in school may be doing.
- I show images of the lesson subjects with my mobile phone, but it doesn't work very well because the screen is so small.

Tutors mention that not having access to a laptop or a tablet and having to rely on parent's mobile phone has had impact on the tutoring sessions.

“There has been a family member ill this week which has bumped the session as Mum needed her phone.”

“My student is dependent on using her Mum's mobile for lessons which means if Mum needs the phone due to family illness or so on, we can't meet. It's also such a small screen which makes sharing resources or checking working done like maths working out or looking at handwriting really hard to do. A tablet or laptop would really improve the student's learning experience hugely as they'd get more out of lessons and be able to do more work independently.”



“Having a tablet would help as many children are learning technology before school and there is so many educational games on there that they will be learning whilst playing which will help those that are a bit behind to their other class mates.”

“When using WhatsApp video calls there are restrictions on what we can do. If we want to read from a book we have to both have a copy of the book. With a tablet I could share lots of different books with learners. If we're only looking at a short passage this would work much better.”

Feedback from parents:

The parents are generally grateful and really happy that the tutors are understanding and flexible with their lack of equipment and unreliable internet connections. Many parents have not had a positive or understanding relationship with their children's school and therefore they are happy seeing a real improvement in their children's learning and enthusiasm towards education. However, some parents mention that having tablets and better internet connections would improve their children's learning experience.

“We have had a few issues with the internet and being away. Our tutor has been so flexible and understanding of our way of life, like us not having electricity to charge the phone as the generator broke and no internet one day as my phone had no data etc. She is really amazing.”



“The tutoring is good but the connection seems to be bad. My daughter has a tablet but the hotspot internet only connects to my phone and is slow. Maybe a wifi box might help.”

Good practice

The project has been a bigger success than we could have ever imagined. We have reached our maximum capacity for now and have had to stop taking new referrals and stop recruiting new volunteer tutors.

We have been overwhelmed how many people are willing to volunteer for the project.

The feedback from the families has been only positive and we have seen some real improvement in children's engagement and enthusiasm towards education. As well as this, parents are seeing their children's confidence increase and the positive aspects that education provides, which sometimes may not be apparent when children come home from school.

Our volunteer tutors have adjusted to the situation and have been creative, flexible and understanding with families' lack of digital equipment and sometimes poor internet connections.

Hearing the tutors and parent's frustration about the lack of tablets and unreliable internet connection we decided to use the £500 we received from the HEAR network to buy tablets for the children in our project. We also created an Amazon Wishlist to see whether people were willing to donate. To date we have been able to buy most children in the project a tablet!



The success of our project has not gone unnoticed, some of our volunteer tutors are now working with Roma children referred to our project by The Roma Support Group and Luton Roma Trust.

Several Local Authorities and schools have also approached us and wanted to know if they can get involved.

Together with Kings College London's #RomBelong project we have decided to evaluate the project, fundraise and turn it into a permanent tutoring programme for Gypsy Roma and Traveller children. By learning from this pilot project, we will develop an easy access tutoring platform that will be accessible to every child, no one will be digitally excluded.

We are still figuring out how to navigate lack of internet and data access, and have just purchased the first mobile wifi dongle to see if this a possible solution

Recommendations

- Local Authorities and schools need to consider digitally excluded children when designing their homework assignments during and after Covid-19 school closures.
- Schools should provide tablets or laptops for those children who don't have them at home as well as guidance how to use them
- The Government should make sure all households have access to a good broadband connection
- Private on and offline tutors should be provided for children who have fallen behind in their education during and after Covid-19 pandemic. The tutors need to be flexible, culturally competent and non-judgmental



- Government should earmark some of the funding given to schools to tackle the impacts of Covid-19 school closures to make sure BAME groups are treated fairly when distributing these funds

We want to thank HEAR network for giving us this opportunity to highlight the impact of digital exclusion to Gypsy Roma and Traveller children's education, and for enabling us to buy tablets for the children in our tutor project.

