



GRT HISTORY MONTH 2021 - CHRIS NORTH, 'FREEDOM THROUGH FUN'

On June 29th, 30th and July 2nd I was privileged to be able to provide Workshops for seven to ten year old children in two West Sussex Primary Schools on the theme of 'Gypsy, Roma, Traveller History Month'.

My aims were to raise awareness of how we all have different needs, abilities, backgrounds, cultures, families, homes and interests. We need to value our differences, the things we each bring to the communities we learn and live in and make a difference to each other's lives.

Also to provide information and experiences to raise specific awareness of the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller communities and their culture. Here is a summary of the activities we were all involved in at both schools.

While the children came into the hall, I played the uplifting 'YouTube' song 'Everyone Belongs' which celebrates diversity. Their teachers had well-prepared their classes beforehand and were really supportive, fun and flexible; the children were also familiar with the song and sang along. I'd also created a YouTube video 'GYPSY, ROMA AND TRAVELLER HISTORY MONTH' as a background resource.

We began by sharing our ideas about the Gypsy Roma traveller culture and their way of life both now and in the past; their knowledge of nature; love of horses; crafts including flowers, paper flowers, carving including wooden spoons, cooking, dancing, storytelling, living outdoors; independence; family life; caravans.

How the houses and homes we live in are different. There are differences too in how we communicate, the languages we use and there is a Romany Gypsy traveller language too. One girl showed us some Makaton sign language. We talked about ways we can express ourselves, our ideas and what we understand. Dance, drama, story and poetry writing, pictures, craft and art, sport, technology etc. We thought about some famous people who are from Romany Gypsy backgrounds.

We talked about how we're all different. In pairs we looked at each other's hands and how they're alike and unlike, then as a whole group shared what we'd discovered. We talked about our other differences including our physical appearances, communities, cultures, families, religions, faiths, language, where we live, our interests, skills and what 'our culture' means.



Children then spoke about what they themselves knew about the traveller community. 'Traveller' is an umbrella word for Gypsies, Romany, Travellers, Fairground and Showmen, Circus. This is why we use the letters GRT – Gypsy, Romany, Traveller. Today most travellers live in permanent homes but years ago they would travel around in caravans, that's why they're called 'travellers'. They talked about their experiences of going to a fair or circus and what they liked.

On a flip chart, we wrote down words they connected with the Gypsy Romany Traveller communities, horses and horse fairs; gypsy caravans; dancing, storytelling; animal tracks; fairgrounds and so on. Later in small groups, the children wrote their own words on 'post-it's' to create spontaneous poems, 'chomping horses'; 'clattering caravans'; flickering fire' etc etc. The children placed their 'post its' where they chose on large sheets of card and then read them all out one 'post it' after another, creating their own unique poems. There were some amazing and imaginative ideas.

They'd been sitting for a while and so it was time to stretch and move with a drama activity. We did some warmup exercises – shaking their hands, arms, then moved around the hall in different ways including happy, sad, slow, fast, suspicious, then they crawled, hopped and danced. This led to 'statues', working in groups of three or four I gave each child in the group a number then when I said their number, they began to form their statue, 1,2,3,4, high, low etc. The frozen statues they created included 'Getting horses ready for the horse fair'. 'The fairground'. 'The boxing match' and one or two suggestions of their own. They then shared their statues with each other.

Using a modern interpretation of Gypsy Romany music C.D., in whatever way they chose they moved to the music individually, then in pairs or a group. We talked about what it feels like to freely move and dance. They created some fantastic, original dance moves and one boy said, "It was freedom".

Next they moved on to working together on their own creations based on an idea of their choice from the things we'd talked about earlier in the day, using any of the resources around the room.

Some wrote their own traveller stories or plays. We talked about the traveller flag. I have a 3 feet by 5 feet Romany Gypsy flag and they thought about what each part of the flag meant. One boy whom I later learned was from a Romany traveller family said the red wheel was blood. He explained it was about our blood lines, what we inherit, our culture. Others designed their own Romany traveller flags using art or collage materials. Some children created their own designs for decorating a traditional gypsy caravan or 'vardo'.



The children had also watched excerpts from my DVD about the 'Appleby Horse Fairs' including scenes of the traditional gypsy caravans being pulled by horses, cooking on an outdoor fire and horses being washed and groomed in the river. This gave them a better understanding of what life was like at the Appleby Fair. I also took in a model gypsy caravan which my father had made from matchsticks in 1983, also some illustrated books for them to look at.

All this generated conversation. One boy told me his great grandmother when she was a girl in London had lived in a gypsy caravan during the second world war while the bombs dropped. Another boy told me they had a gypsy caravan in their garden. The children were animated and enthusiastic.

Together the children created the most amazing things including cardboard models of gypsy caravans, outdoor fires, made their own plays, stories, poems, paintings and designs. I also read them the traditional Romany tale, 'YOKKI and the PARNO GRY' which inspires hope and celebrates the positive values of creativity. In one of the schools two children together wrote a wonderful story which they called, 'Shadow's Life'. This is now the first story on my YouTube channel written by children.

All the children were so enthusiastic, imaginative, caring to each other and fun to be around. Their interpretations in drama, creative writing, dance, art and craft and sharing of ideas resulted in some wonderful work and with huge thanks to their class teachers and head teachers for all their support and enabling me to be in their schools. The children are a real credit to their classes, their schools and themselves.

At the end of the day I gave each child a half sheet of Romany Traveller stickers which they were thrilled with. A reminder of the day, the importance of understanding diversity, understanding each other, and of course valuing the Gypsy, Roma History and culture.

Whilst working in schools I endeavour to be flexible, use a range of activities to engage children's imaginations, take into account their individual interests, needs and recognise their individual 'comfort zones'.

Chris North, July 22ND 2021

07896958745

chris@freedomthroughfun.co.uk

www.freedomthroughfun.co.uk

www.youtube.com/chrisnorththestoryteller