

# Partnership approaches

## New futures for Travellers

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### Introduction

Travellers in the UK are not a homogeneous group but are several, disparate and uniquely individual in their cultures and life-styles. A common experience shared by all of them is a difficulty in accessing and maintaining contact with one school throughout the compulsory school years. High levels of illiteracy and lack of formal qualifications signal the failure of state education to overcome the barriers associated with mobility in life-style, racism and institutional discrimination.

Gypsy Traveller groups engage in resistance and rarely continue with formal schooling into the secondary stages. Showground families usually rely on school-based learning packs to support them during the travelling season (March–October). The lack of continuity and coherence, particularly at the early stage of literacy acquisition, affects pupils' attitudes to school work and has evident consequences for their attainment.

Relevance in the curriculum, teacher–pupil relationships, expectations and aspirations all play a strong part in the progress of any child, but for Travellers these are key issues. For groups whose cultural and business lives are strongly centred within the extended family, home-learning is highly valued. The role of schools is critical in supporting and enabling this approach with school learning. Schools and Traveller teachers have developed a range of approaches (peer and paired support, taped and audio books, writing into reading, desktop publishing, etc.) and resources (Traveller-related content, role models, videos, photographs and ICT) which are proving to be motivating and help to overcome some of the barriers.

For those Traveller pupils whose literacy difficulties are persistent and more long term, innate or specific difficulties must be considered. There is already some evidence of familial patterns of dyslexic type difficulties emerging within some closely related groups. Providing appropriate and adequate teaching support for such pupils is challenging, for both teachers and the families.

## **Traveller communities**

Travellers are groups with a long history as distinctive communities found in most countries in Europe (Fraser, 1992) and latterly in the USA, Canada and Australia. The name Traveller indicates a close connection with a history of mobility and in some respects is misleading and even unhelpful today. Many Traveller groups never travel and most are mobile only as and when it is an appropriate mechanism for earning or avoiding dispute. At European Union level, a decision was taken to identify two discrete groupings whose lifestyles and cultural traditions were 'different' to the dominant settled communities (EC, 1987) and who were largely marginalised from mainstream education provision as a result of racism. The Gypsy and traditional Travellers are generally signalled in written documents as Gypsy/Travellers for brevity, but without any intention of disrespect for the diversity within this generic term, while the term Occupational Travellers is used to denote Circus, Fairground and Bargee groups (Kiddle, 1998). Migrant workers are not included within either definition, but in the UK some street market traders are increasingly viewed as Occupational Travellers. A newer group of Travellers has emerged within the UK since the late 1950s, the New Travellers, or New Age Travellers, some of whose families are now into the third generation.

Historically Travellers have undertaken occupations associated with buying and selling, artistic and artefact productions (including entertainment and light metalworking) and various roles within the agricultural domain. In all cases the driving force has been to achieve financial security and independence while also maintaining their distinctive cultural mores and identities. This continues today with families diversifying their skills to occupy niche markets which support their traditional lifestyles. Thus, for many Travellers, mobility is still a strong feature, with most using housed accommodation, as and when appropriate to their needs.

Since the inception of public schools Travellers have experienced difficulties in securing access, continuity and coherence in formal education. Today Travellers continue to suffer such discrimination with the result that levels of illiteracy are high and lack of formal qualifications adds to their exclusion from the waged job markets. However, Travellers themselves also exert agency (Danaher, 2000) and many prefer to continue their traditions of education being undertaken within the family and community: education to be a Traveller is equally, or even more, important than education for employability (Liegeois, 1998). For Gypsy/Travellers, in particular, this is a significant feature in maintaining and strengthening ethnic role boundaries (Acton and Mundy, 1997).

It is against this richly diverse and complex background that this chapter attempts to signal the specific issues that have to be addressed in order that schools ensure that Travellers achieve the levels of formal education necessary for independence and empowerment within our society.

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## **Racism and bullying**

Travellers experience racism in their daily lives and mobile families are easy targets. Within schools they are faced with daunting institutional racism, where access to a place on the school roll, appropriate curriculum subjects, learning support and other services can be almost impossible to obtain when only temporarily in an area. All Traveller children are subject to name-calling and other forms of bullying, particularly in the playground and on the journey to and from school. Such regular attacks on the group identity, added to a lack of confidence related to lack of experience or bad experiences in schools in the past, contributes to low self-esteem, depressed expectations and, ultimately, few educational aspirations. The relationship between esteem and the ability to capitalise on learning experiences is well documented, so, for this reason alone, Travellers must be considered an 'at risk' group of learners. This is not to problematise Travellers and their cultural life-styles, but rather to expose the critical role of education providers in establishing the necessary conditions for successful learning.

Racism and bullying are endemic in schools and are reflective of the attitudes within the school community. While schools work at eliminating such negative attitudes, unless the school involves its wider community in the developments there will be no significant change in behaviours. All Travellers recount incidences of name-calling and many experience more serious forms of racism, some of it from staff (Lloyd, Stead, Jordan and Norris, 1999). Travellers regularly report that they have to sit at the back (or at the side) of the class and are often left to do some colouring-in or to work on their own with the few books and papers which they have brought with them. Being thus regularly marginalised further contributes to their rejection of schooling and causes them to fall back instead on their own resources in home-learning (McKinney, 2001).

Many teachers do resent the interruption to their class plans when a new pupil arrives and leaves during term time, often after only a short stay. There is a danger that regular such occurrences will be allowed to justify a lack of drive towards developing inclusive approaches for Travellers unless the school management gives a strong lead in ensuring a genuine welcome and providing appropriate levels of support while the children are enrolled. Good practice involves placing the Traveller pupil with a supportive buddy and within peer groups for as many activities as possible. By demonstrating that s/he is part of the class the other children are given a positive role model of inclusive behaviour. Research shows that there has been an improvement in the primary sector in recent years (HMI, 2001) but as yet less success at post-primary stages.

## **Parents and home-learning**

Traditionally the family has been the main source of education and training for Traveller youngsters. Cultural traditions, family histories, knowledge of

the country and ways of dealing with society, day-to-day living, skills in self-representation, selling, finding work opportunities, health care and child rearing are all considered to be integral to the role of the family; not just the nuclear, but extended family kinship grouping, is traditionally involved in this process. Family-centred approaches are, therefore, very important resources for schools to use in enhancing Traveller children's learning. Parents, or older siblings, can act as home tutors, supporting formal learning through dialogue with the school and home tutor. Such tutors benefit from training, that is, being given the skills and knowledge which allow them to undertake the role of listener and advocate and where possible to model reading and writing. Home-tutors have to be aware that they have an important role in supporting the teacher by setting aside time at home for school work, ensuring some space, and in the care and management of learning resources. Where there is limited space, as in a caravan on the move, these issues take on an enormous organisational significance, especially where the home-tutor is also involved in the family's earning enterprises.

Traveller parents may rely heavily on oral communication with the school, often through their children. Youngsters' misunderstandings of teachers' words have long been a source of mirth for adults, but when there is no way of checking out their version with the written form parents can be left feeling confused, embarrassed and even slighted. Schools must review their communication approaches to prevent any parent being misinformed or lacking full information. Most schools are already adopting inclusive approaches for other minority ethnic groups' language needs, but often forget Travellers' needs in this respect. Face-to-face and telephone communication provide appropriate channels for building rapport and securing co-operation. Travellers value highly teachers who take the trouble to get to know them and their children and usually improved attendance is seen in such schools.

For a non-literate family there are enormous challenges presented today by the expectation in schools that parents will take a significant role in supporting their children's formal learning. This of course includes the acquisition of literacy skills, particularly at the early stages. Many Travellers need the support of verbal and practical instructions, modelled by teachers at school meetings, in the home and on video clips. Such approaches are working, with more and more Travellers engaging successfully with primary schools.

Parents need instructions on how actively to listen to children's reading and writing. Parent prompts in video format are especially easy to use as many Travellers have video recorders. Giving stickers for them to attach to the work supervised also allows them to demonstrate the success or otherwise of the child's efforts. Regular, warmly supportive check-up phone calls by the school are also motivating and help ensure trusting, collaborative relationships. This works too with older pupils who are learning at a distance while they travel. Keeping in touch with their 'own' teacher(s) plays a significant part in keeping pupils on track with their studies (Carroll and Jordan, 1994).

## Oracy

As with most sectors of British society up to the nineteenth century, the opportunity to acquire literacy and formal book-based learning was unavailable to Travellers, so oral transmission remained the dominant form of communication. The languages and dialects which they spoke thus remained unrecorded and largely unknown to outsiders (Bakker and Kyuchikov, 2000). With the advent of compulsory schooling for all, many Travellers did attempt to attend school, usually during the winter period (Whyte, 1979). However, bullying and other discriminatory treatment, both personally racist and institution-alised, helped to marginalise Travellers further within the dominant society and thus confirmed them in their belief in relying on their own resources (Kiddle, 1998). Skills, knowledge and cultural codes continue to be transmitted orally from generation to generation.

Oral skills are thus valued and the development of high levels of listening and talking skills are essential characteristics of successful Travellers. There are today significant differences between the languages of Gypsy/Travellers and those of Fairground families. With the schism between the two broad groups in the UK in 1886 these differences have become more pronounced and the different patterns of travelling and school attendance have also contributed to the changes. At present there are four main Gypsy/Traveller languages or dialects within Great Britain, Romani, largely spoken in England, Gammon or Kalo in Wales, Shelta in Ireland and Cant in Scotland. As yet, these are under-researched and only now are some being recorded in written form, with Romani being the dominant and, to some extent, international language. Many Gypsy/Travellers express reservations about the publication of their 'secret' languages and some even resent this imposition by a dominant, international group of Romani and Gypsy academics. Few Travellers in Britain are aware of this development, and even fewer have access to the texts now becoming available, often through small and relatively obscure publishers. There is then an added complexity for young Travellers entering school, where not only the language of school is not always explicitly taught, but teachers are also unaware of the complexity of the languages used by Travellers. Traveller parents who have had little, if any, formal schooling do not have the necessary common understandings adequately to prepare their young for school entrance, nor to argue for appropriate provision. At the same time it is important not to underestimate the very real knowledge and skills in oracy which they have and which can be developed further within the school curriculum.

Traditional modes of working and earning a living have ensured that all Travellers have become orally adept at establishing a quick rapport with possible clients; negotiating deals and persuading 'punters' to part with their money. Being able to convince and maintain a line of argument, demonstrating awareness of social signals and appropriate knowledge, being alive to subtle nuances of reaction in clients and overcoming reticence, all allow them to

operate successfully without recourse to any written materials. Children can be encouraged to discuss their perspectives on aspects of conflict and racism within Language, Moral and Religious Education and Personal and Social Development. Drama and storytelling offer opportunities for Traveller children to work collaboratively with others in exploring stereotyping, bias, pejorative use of words and the use of genre to convey message to different audiences. Tape recording of agreed outcomes can support oral productions into text, particularly group writing.

Within their family and community lives aural memory is highly valued and building significant memory banks of facts, such as telephone numbers, geographical, technical and scientific information, is an essential prerequisite for survival. Such skills can be exploited in the development of storytelling, reciting rhymes and poems, singing and abstracting facts from TV and audio programmes in a variety of subjects. Traveller-specific rhymes and stories are no longer abundant within the community so schools should check the young child's level of awareness of rhymes and rhythm. Most are likely to be more familiar with TV jingles and pop music than with the stereotyped socialising of storytelling round the campfire.

### **Relevance of literacy**

Practical reading and writing skills, reading with a purpose, recognised and valued within the family, are necessary approaches to engage the reluctant Traveller. This is helped by the requirement for a written exam as part of achieving a driver's licence. For all Traveller males (and increasingly females) a licence is a prerequisite for self-employment, yet fewer males attend even primary schools on a regular basis so are less likely to be competent readers. One young Gypsy/Traveller girl (a good reader) has successfully coached her older non-literate brothers to pass the test orally. The relevance of reading is further reinforced by the need to cohere with safety regulations on the collection and disposal of different types of scrap materials, long a source of income for some. Traveller teachers use these practical needs as a basis for setting up family literacy schemes.

Schools which capitalise on family interests, such as certain TV programmes, the close-knit relationships and celebration of community events not only show respect for that family's life-style, acknowledging the diversity and drawing out the similarities in behaviours in the class membership, but also promote the significance of the affirmation of family life to children's learning. Rather than the school arranging to have a project on the Fairground or the Circus when one visits the town it is better to draw on the Fairground or Circus child's talk and writings to act as a catalyst for the class to engage in further study later. As one Show parent so graphically described it, 'My child knows all about the Shows; she teaches it in every school she ever attends! She already knows all that, but I want her to learn something new, something we can't give her.'

It is generally thought that the lack of culturally relevant reading materials is a contributing factor in academic under-achievement in Traveller communities. There are several Traveller writers publishing widely today whose stories can be used to raise awareness of the contribution to storytelling made by Gypsy/Travellers. Books by Duncan Williamson can be read by older children themselves, as can those by Stanley Robertson. Both authors, and other Travellers, are available as storytellers to schools through the Scottish Arts Council schemes.

Several Traveller Education Services (TES) have developed a range of culturally orientated resources with some being of a very high quality. Materials, such as *Just Like You*, *A Horse For Joe*, *The Smiths*, *Shaun's Wellies*, are attractive for any child at the early stages of literacy, while *The Life and Story of May Orchard* and *Moving with the Times* provide a sound basis for raising awareness (within the whole class) of Gypsy/Traveller cultural mores. A range of low cost alphabet booklets and early readers, based on Traveller life, are produced by several TES but some Travellers express resentment when their children are given books which are different to the others in the class. Such materials are best kept in the library corner and for home reading.

Some other approaches which have been shown to be relevant have included letter writing, desktop publishing, motor mechanics, hair-dressing and clothes magazines, baby care, Health and First Aid certificates.

Letter writing, particularly to family members who are away for significant periods, is seen to be especially valuable when it includes personal photographs. This allows families to keep in touch and is motivating for youngsters who can demonstrate newly learned practical skills. Birthday, wedding and anniversary cards are particularly popular, as is the advent of any new baby. Using desktop publishing software, pupils can create their own message and incorporate quality photographs relevant to the sender and receiver. Spell check and grammar correction software aids the writing process and removes much of the frustration, as do content-free programmes where teachers can enter essential words appropriate for the pupil's task.

The use of technology, which includes giving pupils cheap cameras to take photographs in their home settings, acts as a spur for the development of talking skills and ultimately underpins the need for writing skills. Scanning in Traveller images to computers allows the construction of personalised and culturally correct productions such as jigsaws, posters and postcards to send back to school in order to keep in touch with the class when travelling.

Supported family learning sessions, where several members are included in activities within Community Learning Plans, can also help to support the development of literacy competence within a less formal setting than that of the school.

## Learning difficulties

The variations in teaching styles which mobile pupils meet can add to difficulties in literacy if staff are not sufficiently sensitive to the need for some continuity and coherence. Supporting the Traveller pupil's use of the learning pack they bring, or using it as a basis for some integrated work with the class or group, can provide such a bridge.

Given the lack of coherence and continuity in some Traveller pupils' experience of the school curriculum it is perhaps not surprising (though not necessarily to be expected) that some may take longer to acquire competency in literacy than their settled peers. The research on whether mobility *per se* affects performance is not conclusive, although most schools would support such a notion, as indeed they do for other interrupted learners, such as Forces' children (Dobson and Henthorne, 2000).

Children who experience literacy difficulties still require direct teacher intervention on occasions, but most often this is not available outside of schools. Rapid access to learning support staff and reading specialists can be arranged in schools which have seasonal influxes of Travellers, for example Eastbank Academy in Glasgow (*Interrupted Learners*, 1998).

Such cases of reading retardation are best reviewed as individuals, with an assessment of the whole learning context, including the pupil's individual strengths and weaknesses. Arranging such a comprehensive review can be problematic where the pupil not only is an infrequent attender, but also changes schools and even crosses local authority boundaries. Missing out on standardised and national testing is common, so learning difficulties often go undetected and unrecorded.

Recording and record keeping play a critical part in contributing to the process. Travellers themselves sometimes do not aid this process as they may move on, either temporarily or for longer periods, without informing the school. It is all the more important then that schools keep the records and contact their local TES or TENET (Traveller Education Network in Scotland) to alert them to the existence of the records should they be required elsewhere.

There is some unpublished evidence of a familial incidence of specific literacy difficulties within some Traveller extended families. Schools should be prepared to explore this possibility when the child is still struggling after a period of good teaching input. Families (when approached in a supportive manner) are usually forthcoming with details of literacy difficulties. The picture can be compounded, of course, by many difficulties being attributable to poor attendance rates in past generations and the perceived lack of relevance in school curricula.

Whatever the underlying or contributing causes may be, the actual follow-up process can be even more problematic. A mobile family may not be in a position to remain in school for a significant period and may even not know where their next stay will be. Hand-held records become a necessity for ease



of transfer. Glasgow City Council has developed just such records covering the full 5–14 curriculum for their winter resident community of Fairground families. These go with them in the spring to keep updated as and when the children complete units of work or go into other schools. Several TES in England and Wales have developed their own versions, particularly covering the Key Stages in literacy and numeracy.

## **Distance learning**

Mobile Travellers are increasingly demanding and making use of distance education packs. Unlike Australia, where there is an educationally sound viable alternative to school-based learning (Danaher, 1998), there is no bank of published distance learning resources in the UK to cover the full school curriculum. Usually a base school, or TES where there is one, selects appropriate texts and resources to segment into chunks of work for use by the learner when out of school for a significant period. While this can be beneficial for practice, rehearsal and revision of work already learned, it is not, as yet, sufficiently funded to allow the full-scale development of a quality distance education approach. The need for a teacher, an adult who interacts with and gets to know the learner as an individual and who takes cognisance of his/her preferred learning style, remains critical in the formal learning process (Carroll and Jordan, 1994).

In Australia, the development of national policies and statewide provision to support these has led to families, at all levels of competence, being able to access quality distance education, where both published resources and human teaching support services are provided, irrespective of place or style of residence. There a learner can succeed and achieve at levels commensurate with their peers, through the use of distance education from early years' groups to senior secondary, FE and, ultimately, University levels. Some TES and schools in the UK, in collaboration within EFECOT EU projects (EFECOT, 1999), have developed appropriate resources and modes of delivery for Occupational Traveller pupils. These have demonstrated the viability of distance education approaches for Travellers.

However, constructing learning materials for a pupil with real literacy difficulties whose family may not have adequate levels of literacy or experience of schools themselves, is not easy and is as yet taxing all who work with Travellers. Most cases require input from teaching staff, sometimes achieved through supported study programmes. Some families have altered their work patterns to include more regular visits back to the base school for direct tuition from familiar teachers, with promising results to date (Jordan, 2001).

Maintaining personal contact plays a significant part in supporting learners at a distance: telephone, fax and e-mail all provide forms of contact for schools. However, e-mail and interactive computer-based learning can be problematic when the Traveller family has difficulty in accessing suitable electricity and internet connections. Access and costs are critical considerations in ensuring

equality through the use of ICT. Drop-in facilities in learning centres where they can get ready access is one way of ensuring equality of opportunity but setting up such facilities in each area generally has not been a priority within the local authority Traveller education budgets.

Many of the problems experienced by Travellers are similar to those of other interrupted learners. Governmental directives, both national and local, have rarely made the necessary connections but instead try to address each individual group's needs on an ad hoc basis. The skills and knowledge derived from each such project are rarely used to inform other projects so that scarce resources are dissipated and effort duplicated: best value approaches are evidently not being applied at the highest levels to providing services for pupils at the margins. The Notschool.net project is currently developing approaches to help engage learners in a variety of out-of-school settings, all supported by tutors (Heppell, 2000). Until such time as there is a national commitment to supporting formal learning in a range of settings for the variety of circumstances that families experience, then Travellers will remain at the margins in state education.

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### Source

This chapter was written especially for this volume.