

Taskforce on Traveller Education:

Primary Sector Working Group – Final Report May 4th 2010

Context

Between September 2009 and April 2010 the Primary Sector Working Group of the Taskforce on Traveller Education met 5 times. Meetings included representatives from the Traveller Community (TTE Traveller Community Rep Annie McDonagh was our main representative), Traveller Support Groups (AMT and Craigavon) ELB's (Belfast and Western), Early Years, 'the Organisation for Young Children and the Department of Education. The 5th meeting of the Primary Sector Working was held in Primate Dixon School, Coalisland on April 23rd. This meeting had a wider attendance of over 17 people, including the Working Group members (as stated above) being joined by 5 Traveller Community Reps, WELB staff and staff from Primate Dixon school including the principal, Mr. Sean Dillon.

The 5th meeting was facilitated by Brigid Loughran, ex-Equality Manager with Belfast Metropolitan College and Board member of AMT. The Chair of the Working Group (Derek Hanway) was tasked with collating primary level issues discussed at the Working Group into a Draft Action Plan. The Working Group agreed that their proposed actions fall into 3 main headings i.e. actions to improve:

- **Educational outcomes** (e.g. attendance, attainment, active engagement, achievement)
- **Constructive conditions** (e.g. building positive relationships between Traveller pupil, family and school, Traveller culture maintained and celebrated within the school)
- **Contextual influences** (assistance to deal with issues 'outside' education but that which impact on the education of the Traveller pupil e.g. accommodation issues, family issues)

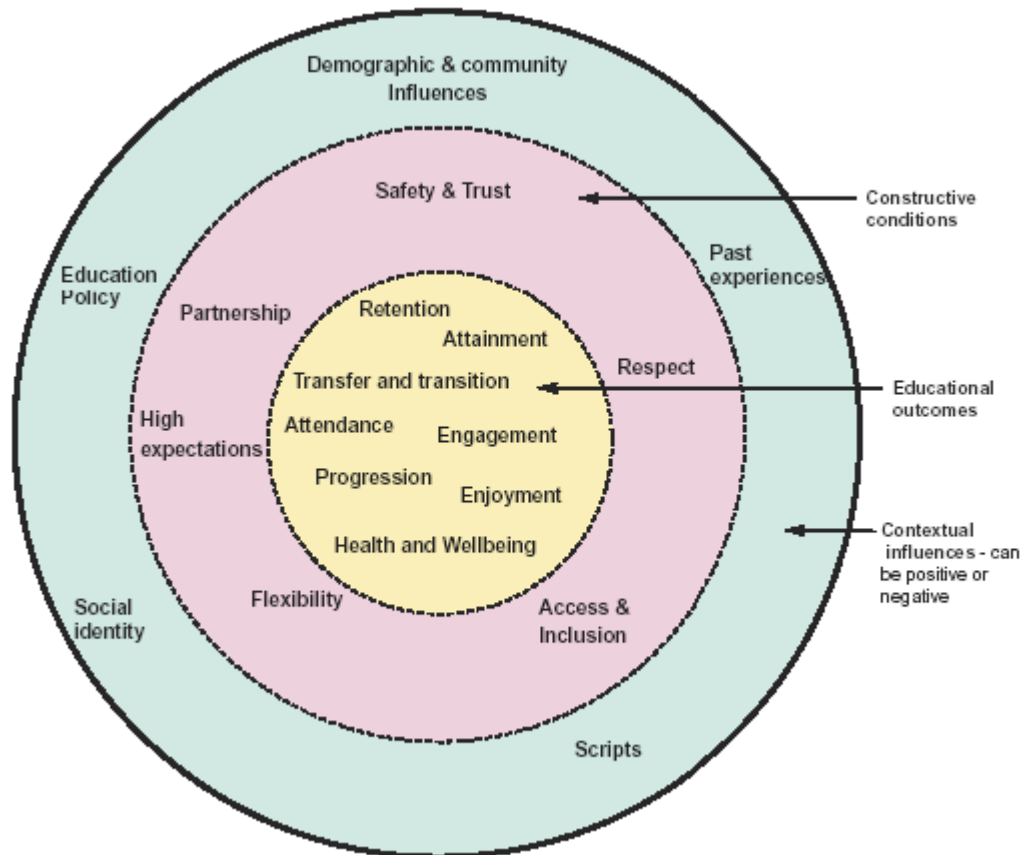


Figure 1 - The Analytical Model

Constructive conditions: Safety, Trusting Relationships

The discussion of the Working Group placed considerable emphasis on the need for positive relationships between Traveller parents, their children and their local school. The Working Group concluded that

- a) There were not enough dedicated staff tasked specifically with the role of building relationships with Traveller children, their families and their schools.
- b) Where there were staff in place, this service was likely to be ad-hoc, with no dedicated specific service to relationship building and maintenance.
- c) The resources available to build relationships with Traveller families was different between our various ELB's and TSG's
- d) There was some confusion about the various roles of stakeholders e.g. EWO, Resource Teacher for Travellers, Education Workers in TSGs.

For many Traveller parents a primary concern when considering schooling is the emotional safety of their children and this lay at the centre of decisions around education made by parents. It is not always easy for teachers and other members of staff to fully appreciate issues within the Traveller community without having a clear insight into the experiences that families face in wider society or internally. Members of the Working Group felt that teachers and other

staff involved in supporting Traveller children's education need to 'win the trust' of Traveller parents. Schools that had developed a reputation for being caring and understanding of Traveller parents maintained a loyal following of Traveller families. Conversely, a breakdown of trust between home and school can be quickly ignited and enduring in its impact. In assessing the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships between Travellers and schools we concluded the following:

Key individuals in schools seem to be instrumental in building trusting relationships with pupils and parents. This does not necessarily mean having one designated member of staff; a more sustainable approach is to develop a number of key personnel who Traveller parents can relate well to. Examples from the UK show that in some schools, parents were given the mobile telephone numbers of key people, welcome meetings were held specifically for Traveller parents (as few turned up to open meetings), and home visits were made by school staff to Travellers either living in houses or on sites.

The experience of the Working Group was that the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers in the South of Ireland has had considerable value and a positive impact in building trust with Traveller families. While there are similar roles to the VTT in the North of Ireland e.g. Traveller EWO in BELB, there is no such mainstream service **across all ELB's** where teachers have dedicated time (out of the classroom) to develop these important relationships.

Traveller representatives have stated that some schools do not have firm anti-bullying policies and clear and effective behavior policies to deal with bullying of a racist nature. While ELB and many TSG reps have stated that all schools would have such policies, the Traveller reps consistently report on their perceptions of unfair treatment with school staff when incidents occur involving their children. In addition, Traveller parents have stated that many schools do not understand the full social and emotional needs of Traveller pupils (e.g. how endemic racism has affected the community) and how to deal with difficult behavior by some Traveller pupils. Dedicated support staff, who are aware of the social circumstances of the pupil (see diagram) could be highly effective in diagnosing and addressing the source of any behaviour concerns.

Research (supported by the experience of WG members) shows that many Traveller pupils often seek out one another's company within the classroom, and 'stick together' even in schools with diverse populations. Evidence seems to suggest that these pupils simply prefer to socialise with other Travellers because of their shared experiences and background. This could be related to emotional/psychological comfort. Research conducted in this area shows that many pupils often have no contact with non-Traveller classmates outside school. In the UK, some schools have developed strategies to break down barriers and cement social relationship between Travellers and non-Traveller pupils. Schools have set up, for example, a Boxercise club which attracted and brought together boys from different groupings (including Traveller students).

Traveller Culture in Schools

While the remit of another Working Group, the Primary Sector Working Group would like to make the following observations.

- Schools should not 'play down' Traveller ethnicity preferring instead 'to see all children as the same'. Most schools celebrate diversity but requests by Travellers and Traveller Support Groups to work on Traveller heritage and culture have been largely dismissed, using the argument that it would 'single out' Traveller children in the school. However, including Traveller culture within a 'whole school approach' could prevent this from occurring. Using the Early Years cartoon series as a basis for working with Primary pupils could assist a 'different but equal' ethos and understanding. In the UK, during Gypsy, Roma Traveller History month (every June) all schools receive classroom lessons and packs to encourage and support discussion on Roma, Gypsy and Traveller culture and current issues such as poor access to accommodation and discussing racism specific to Travellers such as using the term 'pikey' and/or 'knacker'.
- Need for a partnership approach to improving the school bodies understanding of the Traveller Community utilizing the involvement of local Travellers, Traveller Support Groups and others working with the Traveller Community.

Educational outcomes (e.g. attainment, attendance, engagement, retention)

While much of the focus has rightly shifted to retention and attainment of Traveller children in primary schools, the Work Group considered a number of issues surrounding Traveller children's access to education and in maintaining an acceptable level of attendance.

Underpinning our discussion to all of these areas was the need for a partnership approach between Traveller parents, Traveller Support Groups, Schools and education support staff in ELBs. The partnership approach was key to facilitating the progress of practical issues for children in accessing school e.g. transport, uniforms etc, working in partnership on effective support services e.g. homework clubs and other after-school services to a partnership approach to the implementation of education policy affecting Travellers.

To support the attendance of Traveller children in primary schools the Working Group considers that the South's 'Visiting Teacher for Travellers' (VTST) be extended to the North of Ireland.

While the Working Group recommends improved planning in respect of the needs of nomadic pupils we are concerned that the use of Nomadism as a potential for hidden 'acceptable absenteeism' needs to be reviewed.

Attainment

- Each school should establish appropriate targets, outcomes and time scales for improvement in attainment for each Traveller pupil.
- All Traveller Children should be encouraged to achieve to the highest of their educational possibilities. Hence, the Working Group recommends that Traveller children receive any additional education supports deemed to be necessary. This should be identified using a collaborative approach involving teachers, education psychologists, education staff in Traveller Support Groups and of course the parents. It should include, where needed, the services of a Resource Teacher for Traveller Children based on the educational needs of the pupil/s and not on their ethnic background.
- Alongside facilitating access, the need to counter challenges to the inclusion of Traveller pupils in school is a key issue. It is essential to make Travellers feel part of the school and to communicate the message to families and the wider community that Traveller children and young people and their cultures are welcome and respected within the School.
- Support Traveller parents with their own individual educational needs and to participate fully in the life of the school
- Funding to support attainment: Need to Review the 'Capitation Grant' to schools based on a) how it is impacting positively on Traveller children's education within the school b) its use based on ethnic identification and not educational need? C) How resources could be better allocated to support Traveller children in a less 'ambiguous' way e.g. ring-fenced funding for support staff. The review should include provision of specific review of 'Traveller Transport' provision where in some areas transport for Traveller children is provided to and from school but not in other areas.

Proposed Recommendations

What's Available (Summary)

- Advisory Teachers for Travellers in some ELB's but not all
- Traveller dedicated EWO in 1 ELB
- Travellers accessing After-schools in some schools but all
- Afterschool services in some Traveller Support Groups (TSGs) but not all
- Traveller Education Support staff in some TSGs but not all
- Transition Support in some ELB's, not all
- Traveller Education Inter-agency forums in some areas but not all

Supporting Attendance

Proposed Action	Description	Outcome
Traveller Education Support Officers (TESO) across NI	As (VTST in ROI) home school support service that complements mainstream EWO Service across NI	Improved attendance & Relationships
Improve monitoring of Traveller pupil attendance	Traveller Non-attendance is reviewed regularly, achieve 85% average attendance	Improved analysis of attendance and review target for non-attendance
Travellers Inclusion Plan (TIP) for each School developed	Traveller Circular made into TIP for each school with actions to address attendance	School Traveller Inclusion Plan developed for each school
Schools explicit in welcome of Traveller children and parents aware of their rights	Schools amend enrolment policies, ensure compliance with non-discrimination rule and inform parents	Ensure no Traveller refused enrolment based on ethnicity and parents aware of their rights

Supporting Achievement

Proposed Action	Description	Outcome
Team approach between TESO, Advisory Teachers, TSGs	Each school would have Traveller Education Team linking with community based supports e.g. TSG	Improved co-ordination of supports for attendance and achievement in each school/area
Advisory Teachers for Traveller pupils in class based on need and not identity	Schools have Advisory Teachers to support pupils in raising individual achievement	Improved attendance and achievement as increased support for Travellers
CDP of Teachers to review how to increase Traveller achievement in class	Teachers Council/CCEA assess training to increase skills of teachers to support Traveller achievement	Increased achievement of Traveller children and skill base of teachers supporting children

Supporting Attainment

Proposed Action	Description	Outcome
All local areas co-ordinate after-school support to Traveller children so all have access when required	Afterschool services are provided in each area and employ local Travellers as education support workers	All Traveller children have access to afterschool services either in school or with a TSG or NGO
Where needed; Individual Learning Plans for each child are developed and consulted upon	Some children require ILP's, consulting parents; involving TESO and other support orgs', TSG, NGO's, etc.,	Improved attendance, attainment and achievement
Regular monitoring of Traveller children's attainment beyond yearly census.	Review current monitoring of Traveller education in Primary with potential increase in regularity	Improved information as to Traveller children's attainment in



Other Actions

Proposed Action	Description	Outcome
Improved supports for parents	All Traveller parents are supported in their own education and in assisting their child/children	Adult education classes in each area – where possible, done in a school.
All schools have training on Traveller culture & Progs in school	Similar to UK GRT Month, each NI school has resources and guidance for classroom discussion	Each School has pupil and staff aware of Traveller culture/issues
Actions to improve relationships with Travellers and Schools	School open days for Travellers, education classes in school, Traveller advocates in school, meetings with key staff	Improved relationships with Traveller parents and school staff