

# RESEARCH BRIEFING

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## TRAVELLER CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES IN MAINSTREAM POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NORTHERN IRELAND: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

### Key Findings

- ◆ Many pupils felt education was important for obtaining a job later in life but very few attached any importance to achieving qualifications. Six of the seven Traveller parents interviewed were in favour of their children being offered a more vocational curriculum at Key Stage 4, for example EOTAS (Education Other Than At School).
- ◆ Approximately half of the 44 pupils interviewed felt they would be staying on at school up to Year 12, with some intending to go to Further and Higher Education Colleges after the age of 16. However, the remainder were either undecided or planned to leave post-primary school before Year 12.
- ◆ Traveller Support Groups referred to the Northern Ireland Curriculum as having an adverse effect on Traveller pupils' participation in education at post-primary level. It was perceived as being irrelevant to the vocational and cultural aspirations of the Traveller community.
- ◆ Teachers noted two main issues associated with educating Traveller pupils: behaviour and attendance. With regard to behaviour it was reported that

Traveller pupils had difficulty conforming to school requirements and were often unwilling to co-operate or follow instructions. Some reference was made to Traveller pupils' poor attitudes to teachers, dislike of correction and aggression. Many teachers noted as important the frequent absenteeism or non-attendance at school among Traveller pupils, with little or no explanation provided by the pupils.

- ◆ Attending a mainstream post-primary school alongside settled pupils was what most Traveller pupils preferred. This was due to the opportunity this gave them to socialise in school with a wider circle of friends. Five of the seven Traveller parents interviewed indicated that their children did not socialise with settled children outside of school hours.
- ◆ Half of those 44 pupils interviewed had experience of being bullied at school, either verbally or physically, and many felt it was because of their ethnicity. Two parents stated that they had a child who had left school early because of bullying.
- ◆ Nine out of ten teachers felt that all school children need to be offered more opportunities to learn about minority ethnic groups and this could help dissolve boundaries between ethnic groups, enabling settled pupils to become more understanding of Traveller culture.
- ◆ Traveller Support Groups identified racism and bullying as two major issues that discouraged Traveller pupils from staying at school until the compulsory school leaving age. However an additional contributory factor cited by members of support groups was the cultural expectation regarding career aspirations of Traveller pupils.
- ◆ The majority of teachers felt that they required further training on minority ethnic groups, ie Travellers, in order to: raise their awareness of Traveller culture, life and traditions; help them in their teaching of Traveller children; and update their knowledge of the Traveller pupils' circumstances.
- ◆ Suggestions from Statutory Agencies for enhancing the integration process included highlighting the importance of, and supporting Traveller parents in, sending children to school from an early age, and addressing the problem of illiteracy among some Traveller parents to help them support their children's school work.

## INTRODUCTION

1. In July 1998, government in Northern Ireland launched an initiative known as New Targeting Social Need (NTSN). This initiative had the task of ensuring that the needs of the most disadvantaged groups, including Travellers, would be addressed. The Final Report of the Promoting Social Inclusion (PSI) Working Group on Travellers (2000) made 10 recommendations in relation to education. Linking with recommendation 23 of this report, ie “Department of Education to commission research into the educational needs and experiences of Traveller parents and children”, this research project was carried out in order to provide evidence to the Department of Education (DE) on Traveller children’s experiences of integration and social inclusion in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland from an educational and social perspective.
2. The report by the PSI Working Group highlighted a particular difficulty faced by Travellers in Northern Ireland, that of poor levels of educational attainment. It was noted in the report that most Travellers had few if any academic or formal qualifications, for example GCSEs; that illiteracy was rife among the community; that non-attendance at post-primary schools was a regular occurrence; and that there may be only a handful of Travellers in further or higher education.
3. This research addresses the issues of integration and social inclusion within the context of the mainstreaming of Traveller children in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority who are committed to nomadism as a central element of their cultural identity. Traditionally Travellers have experienced antipathy and rejection from the settled mainstream community and this is exacerbated by the general lack of appropriate provision of caravan sites and access to social services or health care. It is estimated that there are 1,685 Irish Travellers living in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2001) and in 2000 an Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) report entitled *Education Other Than at School/Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (EOTAS/SSPPR)* documented that there were 162 post-primary pupils belonging to the Traveller community in Northern Ireland.

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

4. The overall aim of this research was to provide DE with evidence on Traveller children's experiences of integration and social inclusion in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland from both an educational and social perspective. Data obtained from Traveller children are presented alongside information derived from consulting with parents of Traveller children enrolled in post-primary schools, post-primary school teachers and principals, representatives from the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs), the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, and Traveller Support Groups.

## **MAIN FINDINGS**

### **Traveller Pupils**

5. The research indicates that Traveller pupils like being educated alongside their family and friends. They also like friendly teachers and being able to do their favourite subjects, for example physical education and art. Pupils found it more difficult to comment on what they disliked about post-primary school. Some pupils disliked having to get up early for school, moving from classroom to classroom, doing homework, some individual teachers and certain subject areas, such as science and mathematics.
6. Non-attendance at school was often reported to be due to standard reasons, such as being ill or having to attend a medical appointment. However, there were many incidents reported by Traveller pupils of absence due to family events, such as weddings, funerals, christenings or simply visiting relatives. On some occasions this would last a few days or even a full week. Furthermore, pupils provided examples of absence from school due to helping out with domestic duties or with their father's work.
7. Many parents of the Traveller pupils had little or no contact with the school on matters associated with their children's education. Those parents who had contact with the school did so through Parents' Nights or an appointment with a teacher to discuss a child's report or incidents of misbehaving.

8. The vast majority of pupils thought that school and gaining an education were important and the ability to read and write was essential for obtaining a job and for being able to carry out tasks in everyday life, from reading a letter to passing the theory test. Many pupils felt education was important for obtaining a job later in life but very few attached any importance to achieving qualifications.
9. English and mathematics were deemed to be the most relevant subjects for Traveller pupils, mainly because these subjects enabled them to read, write, spell, count money and measure things. These skills were seen to be useful in successfully completing tasks associated with using tools, completing the driving theory test, reading letters or filling out forms and shopping. Some pupils felt technology and design was relevant, especially in situations where they have to use tools to make things. From the research it was evident that Traveller girls considered such occupations as hairdressing, beauty therapy and childcare appropriate career aspirations. However, other girls felt that they were destined to marry, have children and raise a family rather than pursue a career. Many Traveller boys aspired to enter vocational, trade-related jobs, such as plumbing, joinery or bricklaying and frequently this was linked to working alongside fathers or other family members. A number of Traveller pupils were attending further and higher education colleges for training in vocational subjects.
10. Approximately half of the pupils interviewed indicated their intention to stay on at post-primary school until Year 12. A small number were also considering attending a College of Further and Higher Education with the intention of studying a vocational course. A few pupils did not know at what age they would leave school. The remaining pupils planned to leave before the age of 16 and many indicated that remaining in post-primary school up to this age was not part of Traveller culture.
11. Attendance at after-school clubs and taking part in extra-curricular activities were not apparent among the majority of Traveller pupils interviewed. This lack of involvement was explained by them as arising from lack of interest and practical reasons, such as having to leave straight after school because of transport arrangements. Most of the Traveller pupils had established friendships with their settled peers but did not necessarily spend time with them during lunch or break time because they opted to sit with their Traveller friends and family. Nor did they see their settled friends very often

after school because they lived quite a distance away or because the Traveller pupils simply wanted to see their extended family, for example cousins, instead.

12. Half of the Traveller pupils interviewed had experienced some form of bullying at school. This ranged from other pupils making fun of their accents to name-calling and even physical violence. Fifteen per cent of pupils were experiencing bullying at the time the interviews were conducted, with half of those being bullied attributing it to the fact that they were Travellers.
13. A quarter of pupils preferred to go to a post-primary school for pupils from a travelling background. The remainder preferred a school that catered for both Traveller and settled pupils. This was due to the opportunity this gave them to socialise in school with a wider circle of friends. Some Traveller pupils felt it would enable settled pupils to learn about and understand Traveller culture and lifestyle.

### Traveller Parents

14. Parents cited proximity of schools to their home and the fact that there were other Travellers already attending as factors explaining their choice of post-primary schools. Two parents felt they had not been offered a genuine choice of schools and that Traveller children were destined to end up in particular schools. Getting an education and/or learning to read and write were the main reasons provided for sending their children to post-primary school. Three felt that, because of discrimination against Travellers in the workforce, attending post-primary school would not help their children to get a job.
15. Three of the parents interviewed indicated that to their knowledge their children had not experienced any problems with being bullied at school. While there were no current incidents of bullying reported by the parents, three discussed previous incidents and two parents said that they had a child who had left school early because of bullying. Two parents were resigned to the fact that bullying was part of Traveller children's lives.

16. Parents were asked what they thought of pupils being offered a more vocational curriculum at Key Stage 4, for example, EOTAS; six out of seven were in favour of it.
17. While four parents had contact with their children's teachers via daytime visits to the school or attending Parents' Nights, two stressed that they found such occasions very intimidating.
18. Two parents indicated that their children socialised with settled children outside of school hours, five stated this was not the case. Three parents expressed concerns about their children falling into 'bad company' if they socialised with settled children.
19. In regard to aspirations for their children, the Traveller parents generally desired to see them get jobs and be able to support themselves. Two parents had more traditional aspirations for their daughters in terms of engagement and marriage. Two parents estimated that it would take Travellers at least another generation to be fully integrated into the education system.

## Teachers

20. One in three teachers who completed the questionnaire considered their own awareness of Traveller culture and lifestyle was good or excellent, with just under half acknowledging it to be fair. A very small percentage of teachers reported receiving information or training at school on minority ethnic groups, ie Travellers. Information and training had been received by less than half of those teachers interviewed.
21. The majority of teachers felt there was a need for them to receive further information or training on minority ethnic groups, ie Travellers. This would help to raise their awareness of Traveller culture, life and traditions, help them in their teaching of Traveller children and update their knowledge of the Traveller pupils' circumstances. One-quarter of teachers who responded to the questionnaire did not think there was a need for them to receive further information or training. Some of the reasons given were that Traveller pupils should not get or do not require special treatment and that relevant information is already gained from the children and staff in the school.

22. Support received to help with the teaching of Traveller pupils came mainly from special education needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), Traveller support teachers and classroom assistants, according to those teachers who completed the questionnaire. Teachers interviewed referred to support being provided mainly by education welfare officers (EWOs) and ELB officers. There was a call by teachers for additional staff and resources to help with teaching Traveller pupils.
23. Teachers interviewed reported that Traveller children were bullied in school. However, they emphasised that it was not a regular occurrence and expressed some surprise that it was not in fact a major issue in schools. Reasons put forward to explain poor attendance among Traveller pupils included the Travellers nomadic lifestyle; lack of amenities to aid preparation for school; importance attributed to family events; school not being a priority; and children staying at home to help with either domestic duties or working with their father.
24. The teachers interviewed generally deemed the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) irrelevant to the educational needs of Traveller children and stressed that a greater emphasis should be placed upon a more vocationally based curriculum. The 56 teachers who completed the questionnaire were divided in their viewpoint on teachers' expectations of Traveller children's academic achievement. Half of them believed teachers had lower expectations and/or they justified low expectations of Traveller pupils because of their poor attendance record, early school leaving age and non-participation in examinations. The remaining half of questionnaire respondents and most of the teacher interviewees emphasised that they or their school did not have low expectations of Traveller pupils' academic achievement.
25. The vast majority of questionnaire respondents believed pupils in schools throughout Northern Ireland should be provided with more opportunities to learn about minority ethnic groups. It was felt that this could help to break down barriers and enable settled pupils to become more aware and understanding of Traveller culture.
26. Half of the 56 teachers who completed the questionnaire reported having similar relationships with the Traveller pupils as with settled pupils, with one-third describing their relationships as being very positive. Most of the

teachers interviewed also reported that they had positive relationships with Traveller pupils. Teachers described Traveller pupils as having good relationships with one another and they were said to band together well. However teachers also reported incidents of disagreements and arguments. There were mixed responses from teachers regarding relationships between Traveller and settled pupils, with just over half referring to them as being friendly or good with occasional friction occurring. One-fifth noted a lack of socialising between settled and Traveller pupils and stressed that Travellers tended to stick together.

27. Over half the 56 questionnaire respondents reported that they had not had any contact with Traveller parents. Those who have had contact often experienced difficulties organising meetings because appointments were often cancelled by parents.

## Principals

28. Four principals and one vice-principal were asked whether settled parents had ever made an issue of the fact that Traveller children were attending the school. Two stated that this was not an issue that had ever been raised by parents and a further two explained that it had previously been an issue but had since been resolved. In one school settled parents refused to send their children to the school because Traveller pupils attended.
29. With regard to settled pupils, two of the principals interviewed felt that settled pupils did not have an issue with Travellers attending their school. However two principals indicated that there were current problems in their schools involving fighting and name-calling between settled and Traveller pupils.

## Voluntary Groups

30. Services provided by the voluntary groups are varied and depend on success in obtaining funding and the number of Travellers in the area they serve. Some services pertaining to the education and training of young Travellers are offered by the groups. Examples include courses in personal development, IT, woodwork, plumbing and bricklaying for males who are 14+ years old. In addition training in office, organisational and computer skills, as well as courses on values, beliefs and self-identity are offered for

13-18 year old Travellers. One of the support groups has a purpose-built Traveller Centre in Derry which provides a range of support facilities including a homework club. In addition, Traveller Support Groups offer other programmes and services, for example providing general support and information and lobbying for policy changes.

31. Several of the Groups have staff who are qualified to deliver anti-discriminatory training, which was developed by Traveller Movement (NI). A training programme about Traveller culture that explores the history, lifestyle, traditions and language of Travellers and which addresses issues of prejudice and discrimination is also offered by a Traveller Support Group to schools and youth clubs. Contact with ELBs was described in a positive light by some of the groups. Other Groups had minimal contact with ELBs. Groups also said they had minimal contact with post-primary schools.
32. Some Traveller Support Groups stated that the racist attitudes of some settled pupils and teachers and incidents of bullying discouraged Traveller pupils from staying at school until the compulsory school leaving age. Other issues that were raised were the lack of value placed by some Traveller parents on academic achievements, low expectations some teachers have of Traveller pupils, the poor literacy skills of some Traveller pupils, the need for Traveller children to have support outside of school and the problems that segregated primary education in Belfast creates for the post-primary integration process.
33. Girls were expected, in keeping with tradition, to become fully employed in childminding and domestic duties and boys were expected to work with their fathers. It was also felt that the benefits of education and qualifications for Travellers were diminished due to discrimination later in life when trying to gain employment. Poor or inadequate accommodation was also highlighted as a factor impacting on the education of Travellers.
34. They also felt a need for a more relevant vocationally based curriculum in schools. In addition interviewees noted that a more collaborative approach and better communication among/between statutory and non-statutory sectors is required and this would go some way towards encouraging pupils to remain in school up to compulsory school leaving age.

## Statutory Agencies

35. One ELB has its own written policy on Traveller education and the other four ELBs adhere to or are guided by either DE's policy or the Forum for the Education of Traveller Children (NI). CCMS ensure that common policies, procedures and protocols are employed in Catholic maintained schools and they have produced an internal paper on primary education for Traveller children in Belfast.
36. Representatives from the statutory agencies highlighted the lack of real value attached to education by the parents of Traveller children as an issue in the full integration of Traveller pupils into post-primary education. However several indicated that Travellers have yet to see the benefits gained by having academic qualifications. Additional factors impacting on the education of Traveller pupils were reported as: cultural issues such as marrying at an early age; being moulded into following in parents' footsteps, for example, selling tools/scrap or raising a family; frequently attending family events; having poor literacy skills before entering post-primary school; and viewing the curriculum as irrelevant and not meeting the specific needs of Travellers.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

37. The report makes the following recommendations:
- ◆ The open-door policy, which currently exists in post-primary schools, should be further emphasised to Traveller parents to make them aware and encourage them to avail of this policy, with schools ensuring that their communication with Traveller parents and pupils is free of jargon and complex language.
  - ◆ Traveller pupils and parents need to become aware of the advantages of achieving academic qualifications. Traveller pupils and parents already acknowledge the importance of being literate and numerate. However they also need to be aware of the advantages of achieving qualifications in other areas. To help promote this awareness, pupils should be actively encouraged to remain at school to at least Year 12 and possibly beyond to realise the benefits of gaining qualifications.

- ◆ Traveller pupils' plans and aspirations focus on vocational-related occupations and therefore it would be appropriate for post-primary schools to offer educational pathways through which the pupils could gain qualifications and experience in the vocational areas they aspire to, while still studying core GCSE subjects. Schools need to find ways of managing the curriculum that offer flexible curricular provision.
- ◆ Extra-curricular activities and after-school clubs which target the specific interests of Traveller pupils should be offered in post-primary schools, thus encouraging social interaction between Traveller and settled pupils, with the need for Traveller parents to be encouraged to send their children. Clubs should also be provided to compensate for some Traveller parents' inability to help with homework.
- ◆ There is a real need and desire for teachers in post-primary schools to receive informed training and to develop their knowledge about minority ethnic groups. Special care should be taken to ensure that teachers are familiar with Traveller culture and lifestyle. Training would raise awareness and promote understanding of the Traveller community and would help teachers to rethink the pedagogy associated with their subject area to create innovative ways of involving Traveller pupils fully in the learning process.
- ◆ Post-primary schools should be provided with more support. This should take the form of additional staff who have been trained to meet the needs of Traveller pupils and are specifically designated to working with Traveller pupils. Traveller-related educational resources are needed to enrich the learning experience of Traveller pupils and of all pupils in schools.
- ◆ From the research it is evident that some teachers show agreement with the statement that teachers' expectations of Traveller children when in school tended to be unreasonably low. It is vital that these expectations do not impact on the provision of equality of opportunity for all pupils, including Traveller pupils.
- ◆ Post-primary school pupils should be provided with the opportunity to learn about minority ethnic groups eg Travellers, either as part of their

academic subjects or as a separate part of the curriculum. This would include the promotion of multiculturalism and combating prejudice.

- ◆ Post-primary schools and ELBs should consider availing more of the services of Traveller Support Groups who can offer training and information on Traveller culture, identity and lifestyle.
- ◆ The benefits of education and achieving academic qualifications may be valued more by the Traveller community if employers actively promoted job applications from minority ethnic groups, such as Travellers. This could lead to the creation for Travellers of a working environment in the settled community that is free from discrimination and bigotry. In turn this would have an impact on the attitudes and aspirations of post-primary Traveller pupils and their parents.
- ◆ Poor and inadequate accommodation for Travellers adversely affects Traveller children's education at every level, including post-primary school. New or much improved facilities need to be established on Traveller sites to enable children to get ready for school in the morning and complete their homework.
- ◆ Further improved communication and collaboration between statutory and non-statutory sectors is required so that society can work towards the common goal of addressing the educational needs of Traveller children at post-primary level and establishing a position of trust with the Traveller community.

## **METHODOLOGY**

38. The majority of data were collected through semi-structured interviews. A small number of focus groups were also carried out, and a questionnaire was issued to teachers.

### **Traveller Children in Post-Primary Schools Throughout Northern Ireland**

39. Post-primary schools with Traveller children enrolled were identified from data obtained from DE relating to the academic year 2000/01. It was decided that only those schools with more than four pupils enrolled would

be approached and invited to participate in the research. All but one of the schools contacted agreed to take part in the project. Interviews with Traveller pupils took place between February to May 2002 and usually lasted 30-35 minutes.

40. All the Traveller children enrolled in post-primary schools in Belfast and a one in three sample of Traveller children enrolled in post-primary schools elsewhere in Northern Ireland were selected for interview by two members of the research team (n = 58 pupils). In total, 44 Traveller children were interviewed in the schools. The numbers fell short of the anticipated sample of 58 due to some pupils not being in schools on the dates arranged.

### **Parents of Traveller Children in Post-Primary Schools**

41. Contacts were made with seven Traveller parents who had children enrolled in post-primary schools throughout Northern Ireland. These were arranged through representatives from the ELBs, schools, and Traveller Support Groups. Dates and times were organised with the parents and interviews took place in a variety of locations, ie Traveller site, parents' house, post-primary school, or community centre. The interviews occurred between December 2002 and March 2003.

### **Post-Primary School Teachers and Principals**

42. Teachers and principals were approached and asked if they would take part in a series of semi-structured interviews for the purpose of the research. Eighteen teachers in total were willing to be interviewed and they included Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), those with responsibility for Traveller children in the schools, and Traveller support teachers. The interviews were arranged directly with the individual teacher and took place at their convenience in the school between February and May 2002. Interviews were also held with four principals and one vice-principal, either in person or by telephone, during the months of May and June 2002. Each teacher interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.
43. As well as conducting interviews with members of staff in the schools, a questionnaire was devised in consultation with members of the steering

group set up by DE for this project and the Forum for the Education of Traveller Children (NI). Having determined the approximate number of teachers who had one or more Traveller children in their class, a total of 141 questionnaires were distributed to the schools in November 2002 for dissemination to those teachers. The first survey resulted in 47 questionnaires being completed and returned. This was repeated again a month later, resulting in a total final response of 56 questionnaires, ie a 40 per cent return rate.

## Voluntary Groups and Statutory Agencies

44. In order to gather further information relevant to the project, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with representatives from each of the five ELBs and CCMS, who had responsibility for the education of Traveller children. A representative from Traveller Movement (NI) was also interviewed and contact details were obtained for a range of Traveller Support Groups throughout Northern Ireland. Representatives from these groups were contacted and agreed to take part in an interview.

## THE PROJECT

45. The project was undertaken for the Department of Education by St Mary's University College, Belfast. The cost of the project was £22,515.

## FULL REPORT

46. The full report entitled "Traveller children's experiences in mainstream post-primary schools in Northern Ireland: a qualitative study" by Damian Knipe, Dr Anne-Marie Montgomery and Dr Margaret Reynolds is available on the Department of Education website at [www.deni.gov.uk/facts\\_figures/](http://www.deni.gov.uk/facts_figures/)

**This paper is a summary of the research report and as such  
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