

Educational Policies that Address Social Inequality

Ireland case study report 3 The Visiting Teacher Service for Traveller Children

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The Visiting Teacher Service for Traveller Children

Summary

This case study reviews the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers (VTTs). The Visiting Teacher acts as a co-ordinator, liaising between schools, Traveller children and their parents, and the Department of Education and Science. They aim to increase Traveller participation in education, through working with both Traveller parents and their children. A similar visiting teacher service also exists for children and young people who are deaf/hard of hearing or blind/visually impaired. This case study explores the political and historical context behind the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers, before exploring in more detail the aims and objectives, evaluation and outcomes of the service.

Background on Traveller children's progress

There are some 24,000 Travellers in Ireland (2002 Census), although the real figure may be higher due to under-reporting (DES 2006). Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority who have been part of Irish society for centuries, with a distinct culture and their own traditions. These traditions and their nomadic way of life have been marginalised, and many still experience racism, discrimination and socio-economic disadvantage.

Educationally, Travellers have lower participation and attainment rates than their settled counterparts.

- 66 percent of the Traveller population completed education at primary level, in contrast to 21 percent of the general population (2002 Census)
- 2 percent completed senior cycle at post-primary level, in contrast to 23 percent of general population (2002 Census)
- Attainment is also an issue; the Chief Inspectors Report 2001-2004 reported that “levels of attainment of Traveller pupils were not on a par with their non-Traveller peers” (DES Inspectorate 2005).

Improvements have been made at primary level where there is now almost full participation by Traveller children, but there is still a high drop out rate of those who transfer to post-primary education, with the number in each year group progressively reduced as they move up through the school (Hegarty). Of those who are enrolled in school, many often have poor attendance levels (*ibid.*).

Policy and Legislative Background

Up until the 1980s policy relating to Traveller's education in Ireland was based mainly on segregation, with Travellers schooled separately to the settled population, either in schools specifically for Travellers or withdrawn from classes to work with support teachers. Elements of this system still exist to an extent today, with preschools for Travellers and Resource Teachers for Travellers part of the provisions targeted at Travellers. However, government policy in relation to Traveller's education is now based on inclusion, with the integration of Traveller children into mainstream education. The *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy* published in 2006 recommended that “all educational provision should be integrated in a phased

manner, in an enhanced mainstream provision that will result in an inclusive model of educational provision.”

A number of key reports written in the 1990s led to this emphasis on integration, inclusion and interculturalism. One of the most important of these was the *Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community* in 1995, which was followed by a *White Paper on education, Charting our Education Future* in the same year. This set targets for the participation of Traveller children in education, stating that “the overall policy objective is that, within ten years, all Traveller children of second level school going age will complete junior cycle education and 50 percent will complete the senior cycle.” However, as Hegarty has noted, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which this has been achieved as there are no official figures available to assess the achievement of this objective. The *National Action Plan Against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003-05* set further targets for the transfer rate of Traveller pupils to post-primary schools to increase to 95 percent by 2005, and for the retention of Traveller pupils to completion of post-primary senior level.

Four key pieces of legislation are also of relevance to Travellers’ education. The Education Act (1998) promoted equality of access to all schools, and gave parents the right to be consulted about their child’s progress. The Education (Welfare) Act (2000) raised the school leaving age from 15 to 16, and brought in measures to promote regular school attendance and prevent early school leaving. The Employment Equality Acts and Equal Status Acts of 1998 and 2000 outlawed discrimination in employment on 9 distinct grounds, including membership of the Traveller community, making it illegal for schools to refuse to enrol Traveller children because of their status.

Project aims and objectives

- The aim of the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers is that young people of the Travelling Community participate fully in an intercultural, anti-racist education system. (DES, 2004)
- The service provides opportunities for Traveller parents, their children and schools to engage in a process of development that maximises participation and attainment, combats racism and promotes interculturalism (*ibid.*).

Implementation of the project

The visiting teacher’s focus is on encouraging participation, improving attainment, and on promoting intercultural education. They work with children at all levels of education, from pre-school to third level education, providing support to children and their parents. This can include supporting Traveller children through State exams, and helping them to access third-level education and support programmes.

The service was established in 1980. Whilst there is little information about the origins of the service, it would appear that it was set up as a means of meeting the particular needs of the Traveller community. In 1982, the DES appointed 6 VTTs in four areas of high Traveller population (Nunan 1989). By 1995, there were 11 visiting teachers for Travellers (VTTs). Today, the numbers have increased significantly, and there are now 40 visiting teachers working with about 8000 Traveller pupils and their parents (DES 2006).

VTTs are assigned a region, where they act as coordinators working with Traveller families. A key aspect of their work is to liaise between Traveller families and various groups, including schools and Boards of Management, the DES and other agencies in order to promote greater school participation. They are also responsible for data collection.

There has been some collaboration between the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers and Traveller parents. A Traveller Parent Development Day (*Your Child and the Post Primary School - Access, Participation and Outcome*) was held at Dublin City University in March 2004. This day workshop was organised to provide an opportunity for Traveller parents to “think about, discuss and plan for the educational progression of their children to second level schools”. VTTs trained Traveller parents as facilitators for the day so that Travellers’ voice would be heard. In all, 74 people participated, mainly parents of Traveller children in fifth and sixth classes in primary schools or of Traveller young people already attending post-primary. Traveller parents discussed their hopes and fears for their children at school and what they felt was going well and not well for their child. The day was positively received by attendees.

Evaluation

There has been no formal evaluation as such of the service, but the VTST was included as part of the Survey of Traveller Education Provision (STEP) conducted by the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate in 2005. The main purposes of the survey were to:

- report on the inclusion of Travellers in mainstream education;
- report on the additional teaching supports provided to Travellers;
- identify good practice in schools and draw attention to areas where development was required. (DES Inspectorate 2005)

Methodology

The survey included questionnaires sent to schools, data collection in relation to attendance, classroom observations, interviews with principals, VTTs and Resource Teachers for Travellers (RTTs), and focus groups with Traveller parents and pupils.

Key Findings

The Survey found that principals, teachers and parents agreed that the VTST had had a positive impact on Traveller children’s education. Almost all principals acknowledged that the VTST had made “a significant contribution to enrolment and attendance [of Traveller children] in the last decade” (*Ibid.*:53). Post-primary principals stated that staff members in primary schools and the visiting teacher for Travellers acted as important links between parents and post-primary schools. The Inspectors noted that schools were becoming better at communicating with parents, and this was echoed by the Traveller parents themselves. They reported that VTTs had impacted positively on home-school communication, and had provided them with information regarding the various enrolment procedures that schools employed.

At post-primary level school principals and teachers acknowledged that the visiting teachers for Travellers had “played a vital role in encouraging the transfer of Traveller students with their settled peers from primary to post-primary school” (65).

Whilst there was great support for the work of the visiting teachers for travellers, the Survey also reported that the level of collaboration between school's resource teacher for Travellers and the visiting teachers for Travellers was variable (52). Some principals were also unsure of the importance of the support provided by the VTST in their school, with more than 10 percent considering their support to be unimportant in their school (53).

Significantly, many respondents were unsure about the role of the VTST. There was a need on behalf of both principals and VTTs themselves for further clarification of their role as to how best they could support schools (*ibid.*).

Recommendations

Amongst the many recommendations made by the STEP report, there were a number relating specifically to the visiting teachers service for Travellers. The report recommended that VTTs should now concentrate on the continuing involvement of Traveller parents in their children's education, so that they may see the benefits of education. It also suggested that the role of the visiting teacher for Travellers needed to be redefined and their functions clarified. The report recommended that VTTs "should concentrate their resources on working with schools to: improve pupils' achievement; improve pupils' regular attendance; ensure the transfer of all pupils to post-primary schools; support principal teachers and teachers in assisting pupils to settle into post-primary schools; encourage students to remain in second-level education; support schools in devising learning programmes and in managing pupils' behaviour; involve parents as partners in education, and ensure that young children have access to pre-school education" (DES Inspectorate 2005:81).

Project Outcomes

The Visiting Teacher Service for Teachers has been successful in increasing the participation of Traveller children and their parents in education. The service has reached large numbers of Traveller children, and reactions to the service have been mainly positive, both from the government and from Traveller's organisations.

The Department of Education and Science in Circular 20/88 on the Education of Travelling Families acknowledges that "few initiatives in the area of Traveller education have been as successful as the appointment of visiting teachers who liaise between Travelling families and schools and other agencies active in the welfare of Travellers". Similarly, the Irish Travellers Movement wrote on their website that the VTST "has been instrumental in empowering parents to access education for their children" (ITM website). The Chief Inspector in his foreword to the STEP report wrote of the significant "contribution to the increased participation of Travellers" (DES Inspectorate 2006). The service is ongoing, for both Travellers and disabled children.

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