



*Mainstreaming Equality of
Opportunity and Good Relations for
Traveller Children in Schools*

Public Policy Statement 2

November 2008

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



Mainstreaming Equality of Opportunity and Good Relations for Traveller Children in Schools

Introduction

“If I was sitting on my own.... who ever was asked to sit beside me wouldn't do it and the teacher would say ‘ach go on she's a nice girl’. And if I waited off a day, I'd lose a lot of work and I'd try and get it done and I wouldn't be able to catch up. No one would give me their notes...”¹

This briefing paper sets out the Equality Commission's policy position and approach on priority areas relating to the education of Traveller children. In our Statement on Key Inequalities,² we recognised the opportunity to make a difference and to influence those who can make a difference. Our work on mainstreaming equality of opportunity and good relations for Traveller children in schools draws on a range of evidence which supports and informs our work.

Inequalities in education

Education plays a key role in determining a person's life chances and opportunities in terms of social and economic mobility. Those with fewer qualifications and skills are disadvantaged in civic and community life and when competing for available employment opportunities.³ In this context, poor educational attainment can be seen as a clear barrier to labour market entry and progression. The Commission is clear as to its role in this instance – we are not educators, but we have a statutory remit to intervene where continuing disadvantage occurs. There is clear evidence (outlined below) of differential impact for Traveller children and so there is a need to intervene.

Our approach in the first instance has been to work closely with the Department of Education to secure the collection of data. We see this as fundamental in facilitating progress in our four identified themes of attendance, participation, attainment and transitions.

¹McMahon, M. (2006) Consultation Report with Travellers and Traveller Children, ECNI, Belfast. All the quotations from Travellers used within this paper come from this report

²Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland, October 2007, ECNI Belfast

³Ibid

“Everything has a consequence. All policy decisions by Government, by public authorities, by large private companies, whether international or national; all decisions by communities, by small companies, by individuals – all our actions have consequences that affect others, whether we wish it so or not.

This is a call to those with responsibility to remember the reality of inequality, to have it in mind in the decisions they take and to adjust or modify those decisions so that they can reduce its consequences in the lives of people.”

Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner, October 2007



Context

The community of Irish Travellers in Northern Ireland continues to experience a degree of social exclusion and discrimination that is unparalleled with any other disadvantaged group. Despite the establishment of the Promoting Social Inclusion (PSI) Working Group on Travellers,⁴ to examine the exclusion experienced by Travellers and to make recommendations to address this, little has changed.

The PSI report highlighted a number of revealing statistics, which showed the level of exclusion and inequality that Travellers experience:

- only 11% are in paid employment and of those who are economically active, 70% stated that they have had no paid work in the last 10 years
- Travellers, including some of those living on serviced sites, are eight times more likely to live in overcrowded conditions and have limited access to basic amenities such as running water, electricity and sanitation
- the mortality rate of Traveller children up to the age of 10 has been found to be 10 times that for the Northern Ireland population as a whole
- overall, the life expectancy of Travellers is around 20% lower than the general population. Only 10% of Travellers are over 40 years of age and 1% are over 65
- there are high levels of illiteracy among the Traveller community. The vast majority have no formal educational qualifications – 92% have no GCSEs or equivalents

⁴OFMDFM (2000) Consultation on the Final Report of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Travellers, Belfast



Legislation and policy

There are a number of legislative provisions that afford protection to Irish Travellers, including the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 (RRO),⁵ where Irish Travellers are defined as a distinct racial group, and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Also there is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has informed the development of the Children and Young People's Strategy in Northern Ireland.⁶

The policy context for Travellers and education is complex and consists of a number of elements, such as the Government's response to the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Travellers, the Race Equality Strategy and the Department of Education Circular 1993/37: Policy and Guidelines for the Education of Children from Travelling Families. These guide the practice of the five education and library boards.

The Commission's policy positions are informed by the body of evidence that highlights inequalities and disadvantage, including our own knowledge of the practical impact of inequality on people's lives.⁷ Our policy approach in relation to Traveller education has focused on building relationships with organisations working directly with Travellers and, crucially, gauging the views of Travellers and intervening with policy makers in the statutory education sector to seek workable solutions.

Our policy work to date has highlighted a number of issues for Travellers in terms of access to education, for example:

- there is a lack of comprehensive data in this area, making it difficult to compare attendance levels and the performance at Key Stage levels between Travellers and non-Traveller children. We have secured a commitment that data collection will be undertaken across

⁵As amended

⁶Our Children and Young people – Our Pledge – a ten year strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland 2006-2016

⁷Consultation Report with Travellers and Traveller Children on the Equality Commission's Draft Education Strategy; Segregation and Desegregation in Roma Education: Lessons For Northern Ireland; Mainstreaming Equality of Opportunity for Travellers in Education: Towards a Strategy; The Roma EDEM Project; and the Joint Research with Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, on The Adequacy and Effectiveness of Educational Provision for Traveller Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, available from www.equalityni.org



all education and library board areas. This is currently being undertaken via the C2k system and will be greatly assisted by the introduction of a unique pupil number for post-primary pupils

- the vast majority of Travellers leave school with no formal educational qualifications and there are high levels of illiteracy amongst Travellers
- following consultation with Traveller parents and children,⁸ it is evident that Traveller children are often marginalised within schools in terms of participation in school activities, whether extra curricular or as an integral component of the school curriculum
- the significant level of racial prejudice and hostility towards Travellers is a real concern. Evidence⁹ shows that:
 - 87% of people do not want Travellers as a family member
 - 82% would not willingly accept Travellers as a close friend
 - 76% of people would not willingly accept a colleague at work who is a Traveller
 - 76% would not be willing to accept Travellers as residents in their local area
- there is a need to counteract the high level of Traveller children who do not attend school past the age of 14
- the almost non-existent enrolment of Travellers at tertiary education level needs to be examined
- there is a need to reduce problems associated with transitions throughout the school life cycle, the availability of education provision and in what educational settings

Policy solutions

On the basis of our knowledge of Travellers' experiences in accessing education, the Commission considers policy solutions for mainstreaming equality of opportunity for Travellers in education to fall within four broad policy strands:

⁸McMahon, op cit

⁹Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2006

- 
- attendance
 - participation
 - attainment
 - transitions

Framing these issues in the broad educational policy strands achieves two things. First, it sets Travellers into a context where their achievement and aspirations are set alongside non-Traveller children. Second, it provides the vehicle to argue for performance measurement systems that quantify and identify Travellers as an ethnic group in order to frame effective policy solutions for improvement.

Attendance

The attendance rates for Traveller children in education have been consistently low for a number of reasons and are inter-twined with many other issues such as appropriate accommodation, nomadism and cultural traditions. Connolly, in the Race Equality in Education conference report,¹⁰ argues that non-attendance at school tended to be caused by three key factors:

- disillusionment arising from what some Travellers felt to be the low expectations of teachers and thus the poor levels of education they felt they received
- a fear among the children of being bullied, especially at secondary schools
- for some of the children especially, a view that education was just not relevant to them and what they intend to do in the future

“Children are good attendees until something happens, and parents will keep them away from school if they are being bullied”

“The schools don't check on attendance, they are glad not to have to bother with the Travellers”¹¹

¹⁰Connolly, P. (2003) Racial Equality in Education Conference Report, Belfast. Equality Commission and the Department of Education

¹¹McMahon, op cit



We accept that cultural and parental attitudes to education are important factors that need to be considered and this clearly came through in our own consultation with Travellers. However, it is important that these two issues do not define and/or limit the response of statutory agencies. It is important to note that culture in any society is not fixed and attitudes and roles can change throughout a lifetime. Further work is required in this area and in the meantime, statutory agencies should be developing solutions to ensure that Traveller parents:

- are involved in their children's education
- are fully informed of the structure of education
- recognise their responsibility to ensure that their children attend school and the consequences if they do not

Participation

Schools need to create an environment that encourages a sense of belonging, which allows Traveller children to actively participate in school life. Evidence from our consultation exercise highlighted that Traveller children tend to be relegated to minor roles in school activities and do not fully participate in the broad range of extra curricular activities. The impact that racist bullying has on participation cannot be underestimated and was a common thread throughout our consultation with Travellers. The following quotation from a young child shows how this can manifest itself:

“If you have to hold a buffer's [non-Traveller] hand in school, when you let go their hand, they smell it like there's a bad smell on their hands”

Qualitative evidence also highlights that those involved in the education system are not always aware of the cultural and family traditions or the problems faced by Travellers when accessing education. The following is a typical comment from a Traveller parent:

“Our children should be enabled to participate in schools because they should not be treated differently from other children”

Attainment

Evidence shows that many Traveller children leave school early with few or no formal educational qualifications. Traveller parents and children say they want to acquire formal educational qualifications, but in our



direct consultation with them, they expressed the view that this was a waste of time, as their children will not get work afterwards, because of discrimination against Travellers. This is reflected in the numbers of Travellers in work noted above. Traveller parents are also concerned over the lack of analysis and follow up of the available education attainment data.

“There should be routine checks in school to compare how settled children are learning and then measure Traveller children learning against that”

Of the 31 Traveller pupils attending school at Key Stage 3 in 2004/05, only 19% achieved Level 5 or above in English compared to an average of 74% for all pupils. At GCSE level, 92% of the Traveller community have no GCSEs or equivalents,¹² (compared with 5% for all Northern Ireland school leavers). Of those Traveller children who did sit GCSE exams, fewer than 5 of 41 pupils (less than 12%) achieved 5+ GCSE grades A*-C across the years 2003/04 and 2004/05.¹³ This compares with 61% for all Northern Ireland pupils achieving GCSE grades A*-C in the same period.¹⁴

It is generally accepted that educational attainment is linked to employment outcomes and thus the figures noted above may contribute to the fact that only 11% of Travellers are in paid employment, while the 70% of Travellers who are economically active have not had paid work since 1991.¹⁵

Transitions

Transitioning into primary school and from primary into post-primary school are important milestones for all children and Traveller children are no exception. Our evidence¹⁶ shows that in 2004/05, 66 Traveller children left Northern Ireland primary schools but only 36 entered post-primary schools the following year.

¹²OFMDFM. 2000. Final Report of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group

¹³DENI. Indicators on Traveller Education. Available at www.deni.gov.uk

¹⁴DENI. Qualifications and destinations of school leavers 2005/06. Available at www.deni.gov.uk

¹⁵Pavee Point Fact Sheet. Travellers in Northern Ireland. Available at www.paveepoint.ie

¹⁶Hamilton et al (2007) The Adequacy and Effectiveness of Educational Provision for Traveller Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, ECNI/NICCY, Belfast



These figures are consistent with other research, which shows that the numbers attending post-primary education decline each academic year with much lower numbers in year 12 compared to year 8.

For Traveller children who have little or no contact with the non-Traveller community, transitioning from primary to post-primary can be particularly problematic. Results from our direct consultation with Travellers suggest that, overwhelmingly, they are in favour of integrated provision and that separate provision does not reflect equal treatment.

Traveller-specific provision exists in many forms, such as on-site pre-school provision, Education Other Than At School programmes, and at St Mary's Primary School in Belfast. It is important to note that there is a distinction between targeted provision in a mainstream setting to address known inequalities and separate provision per se.

The issue of segregation was discussed regularly in our consultations and was clearly a matter that is of concern for Travellers. Most parents were quite adamant that they do not want separate schools for Travellers or to be educated separately:

“Mixed schools where boys and girls learn together is better for all the children, who should all be treated the same”

Travellers believed that the development of a separate education strategy for Travellers could reinforce their exclusion from the mainstream and when Traveller-only education was discussed, they were very much opposed and thought that this would bring about lower standards. They wanted their children to attend and fully participate in wider society so that they could access the best education on offer. The overwhelming, but not unanimous, view of participants was that integration with the settled community is the best solution:

“There are no separate schools for Indians, Chinese etc., why should there be a separate strategy for Travellers?”

¹⁷Fawcett, L. (2006) Segregation and Desegregation in Roma Education: Lessons for Northern Ireland, ECNI Belfast



Evidence from our paper *Segregation and Desegregation*,¹⁸ however, suggests that lessons from Eastern Europe can provide useful models. The Vidin project highlights the importance of the involvement and participation of Roma and Travellers in the design and management of the project. Effective advocacy and the establishment of good working relationships were cited as important factors.

Good practice measures

In practice:

- Ensure that admissions processes are flexible and responsive to include joint registration or short term admissions, in order to help facilitate an increase in Traveller attendance rates
- Be unequivocal and not underestimate the extent of racist behaviour, such as name calling directed at Traveller children, keeping in mind the definition of a racist incident: ‘any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person’¹⁹
- Ensure that racist bullying incidents are recorded and monitored centrally – school policies should ensure that staff and senior management are clear in how to deal effectively with incidents of racist bullying, thus appraising parents of the school’s intent to create a safe learning environment for their children

In practice:

Toolkits or good practice guides which fully take account of Traveller culture, equality of opportunity and the legislative framework can facilitate knowledge and understanding of the issues from a rights based approach. For example, evidence from our consultation with Travellers suggests:

¹⁸Fawcett, L. (2006) Segregation and Desegregation in Roma Education: Lessons for Northern Ireland, ECNI Belfast

¹⁹Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report (1999), Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny

- an awareness and recognition by the wider community of Traveller culture would help young Travellers to be valued and respected within schools
- there is an evident need to involve and build the capacity of Traveller parents to encourage their children in all aspects of education
- the use of Traveller role models in the classroom, Traveller parents represented on school boards of governors etc

The production of the DVD, *Changing Times* by An Munia Tober and the Southern Education and Library Board is an example of a good practice initiative. This DVD was designed to point Traveller parents, teachers and professionals along the path to successful educational outcomes for Traveller children and young people from birth to secondary level and beyond.

In practice:

The Toybox Project aims to tackle disadvantage, exclusion and poor educational attainments experienced by Traveller children through supporting them in their early years, aged 0-4. This project is run and organised by Save the Children and Early Years.²⁰ An evaluation of this project in April 2007 noted how this project has been very successful in terms of engaging Traveller families and supporting the development of children through play. Service delivery focuses on the work of play workers who visit Traveller families on a weekly basis, bringing a box of toys, arts materials and books. The Toybox worker plays and engages with the child to develop the following skills: communication, creative, motor, speech and language and social. Parents of the children are actively brought into the session, with the aim of supporting their parenting skills and enhancing parents' understanding of the importance of stimulation and play in their children's early years, towards the social and educational development of their children.

²⁰In 2007, NIPPA changed its name to Early Years – the organisation for young children

²¹Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report, (Macpherson 1999)

Conclusions and recommendations

The development of effective public policy strategies and solutions, which mainstream equality of opportunity and good relations for Travellers in education, is essential to break the cycle of deprivation and social exclusion. Education plays a key role in determining opportunities in terms of economic and social mobility.

Therefore, the Commission recommends:

Attendance

- school admissions processes should be flexible enough to allow joint and temporary registration, when necessary
- schools should not underestimate the extent and impact of bullying on Traveller children
- schools should record and monitor racist bullying incidents and act accordingly
- elements relating to Traveller culture should be examined to ensure that public policy responses are appropriate

Participation

- toolkits should be developed to assist schools in understanding Traveller culture through the curriculum
- the whole school environment should be welcoming to Traveller pupils and parents
- the use of positive Traveller role models should be considered
- programmes should be developed that build the capacity of parents to engage with education



Attainment

- projects such as Toybox should be rolled out and mainstreamed throughout Northern Ireland
- positive action measures should be instigated to improve the attainment levels of Travellers from baseline to targets
- homework clubs and transport arrangements should be standardised across all schools

Transitions

- schools should set up processes to ensure that transitioning from pre, primary and post-primary schools are carefully planned, particularly for those Traveller children due to be in year 8 each year
- focused work is needed to identify Traveller children in year 8 and ensure that they continue in education up to year 12
- post-primary schools should instigate programmes to highlight the benefit of further and higher education to Traveller young people
- the issue of segregated provision should be examined in light of the legislative framework





Further information and advice

For further information and advice on equality issues or if you would like to find out more about the Equality Commission and its work, contact us at:



Equality Commission for NI
Equality House
7-9 Shaftesbury Square
Belfast BT2 7DP



Telephone: 028 90 890 890 (Enquiry Line)



Fax: 028 90 315 993



Textphone: 028 90 500 589



Email: information@equalityni.org



Website: www.equalityni.org

You can also use Typetalk to contact us.

November 2008

ISBN: 978-1-906414-15-3