‘Outside The Mainstream: Social Exclusion In Mobile Families From Home-School Partnerships’

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter/article focuses on the situation of Travellers and the problems in their interface with state education. They remain the single largest group of illiterate and unqualified people in Europe, with consequent reduced life chances within an increasingly sophisticated and affluent society. Research has shown that the reasons for their current situation are varied and complex, with Travellers' cultures and life-styles, including high levels of mobility for many, in addition to the overt prejudice and discrimination they meet from the dominant groups, being crucial factors. Bullying is endemic in schools and Travellers 'difference' makes them easy targets, yet society shows little will to tackle such serious problems: children's attitudes reflect those of the adults they see around them. The School Boards (and similar institutions elsewhere) have an active role in setting the ethos of 'their' school, yet they, even unintentionally, may reflect narrow and insular views, especially when they have little knowledge of the diversity within their client group. Training is undoubtedly needed in how to be representative of all in the school community, but exposure to knowledge which reveals the paradoxes and tensions inherent in providing generic services in a pluralist society may make it more difficult to find and retain people willing to take on the task of guiding and supporting their school into an inclusive role.

BACKGROUND TO THE CURRENT SITUATION

Since at least 1975 (1) The European Parliament has voiced its concern at the continued marginalisation of Traveller, itinerant and migrant groups in European state education facilities. Despite the increased free school places for the 5-16 age group (and in many cases beyond) there was little evidence of any improvement in the situation when reports were commissioned in 1987 to identify the reality of the situation: "School Provision for Gypsies and Travellers" by Jean-Pierre Liegeois (2) and "The Education of the Children of the Itinerant Population in the Twelve Member States of the European Community. Fairground Children." by Ludo Knaepkens (3).

As a result of these reports, two seminal Resolutions were passed in 1989 (4, 5) which were to underpin the policy thrust and funding initiatives of the European Parliament, principally the Intercultural and later SOCRATES programmes. Many trans-national partnerships were funded for projects with a focus on the identified key issues, but principally on developing materials to raise awareness of Traveller groups, their history and contribution within the larger settled society, the discrimination and racism which they meet in access and uptake of school provision and the role of education in redressing the problems.

The European Resolutions confirmed Travellers' rights to the same public services as the dominant society but, further, demanded special measures to help ensure that Travellers enjoyed equality of opportunity in realising their rights. The European Commission required each state to submit an account of the actions undertaken to the end of 1991 and these were subsequently published in 1997.
they do not make comfortable reading for those who believe that education is for all. Since then further actions have been demanded, including a greater emphasis on training for Travellers to act as mediators for their groups, to train as teachers and for all teachers to have training in Travellers' particular educational needs. This information has barely percolated to local authority level, and rarely at individual school and School Board level, yet, the Treaty of Maastricht binds us to these actions.

THE PROBLEMS AND SOME PARADOXES IN ADDRESSING THEM

While it was important to establish and highlight Travellers' very specific, special or particular needs, it also brought a degree of exposure and limelight which many Travellers had not sought and often did not want. They had survived many centuries of often brutal and repressive legislation, usually by keeping a low profile, a degree of separateness and by being 'unseen' as they went about their lives.

The price they paid was exclusion from most of the public services we take for granted, eg health and education, including disenfranchisement from voting, access to public libraries, having a voice on public platforms. Thus it has been difficult for them to counteract the largely racist stereotyped images of them presented in the media.

Travellers an an out group

If you lead a largely mobile life-style where do you belong? Where are your roots? In settled society such questions are fundamental to 'placing' new acquaintances and colours how they are viewed. For Travellers this is not a meaningful or helpful concept: 'belonging' for them is not about a place, it is about being members of a family, an extended family or related group. They thus are constructed by settled society as not belonging to the community, of a school, village or urban area. They are 'outsiders', often ostracised and unwelcome, with accusations of 'not paying taxes' and 'leaving a mess behind them', except for other than the shortest of stays such as when the Circus or Shows arrive for a few days. Gypsy Travellers not on official sites are quickly moved on elsewhere so there is little opportunity to settle into school or the local community. If one is not seen to belong or stay long-term in a place, how does one get involved with the School Board or similar organisation? For Gypsy Travellers it is virtually impossible; for Occupational Travellers, their contributions to 'local' charities and fun events support a degree of acceptance but with little real involvement in the 'settled' decision-making groups.

For some Travellers there are advantages in remaining separate; ethnic boundaries are more easily preserved when there is an 'other' or 'enemy' to avoid, and cultural cohesion and distinctiveness are more easily maintained when little better alternatives beckon. Regular schooling, with all its advantages and opportunities, may well threaten the very existence of traditional Traveller lifestyles, as has been the case for other ethnic groups who when once integrated into schools are subsequently assimilated into the dominant society. Also they may well have a lot to lose and perhaps little to gain, since those who are seen to succeed at school are predominantly from the ambitious, educated and empowered groups within society.
Apart from the obvious difficulties of mobility and the consequent frequent changes of schools, Traveller parents lack the necessary 'cultural capital' to readily take advantage of state schooling \((12)\). Many are unschooled or have only attended school intermittently. For some their experience of school has ranged from the demeaning experience of total social rejection to a lack of academic success leading to reduced self-esteem. Thus for many the relevance of the school is questioned, as it is, indeed for other groups with similar negative family experiences, often leading to disaffection and truancy \((13)\). How are such perspectives reflected in School Boards? Are School Boards a mechanism for ensuring that dominant, indigenous, settled views and values are supported and promoted?

**Parental responsibilities, culture and mobility**

While European legislation upholds and confirms Travellers' ethnic and cultural life-styles, it does not propose that ordinary schooling is any less relevant for them, and the only concession in Scotland to their mobility is that Travellers' children may be withdrawn from school to accompany their parents 'while legitimately travelling for work', providing there is regular attendance during the over-wintering period \((14)\). This pattern dates to the days when Traveller life was geared to the agricultural calendar and its attendant Fairs. The Scottish Office (SOEID) has not yet taken cognisance of the Travellers' changed patterns in earning a living.

Travellers now recognise that literacy, numeracy and some vocational qualifications are essential, but there is still a strong belief that families themselves have the key responsibility in educating and inducting their young people, as active, competent members, into their society and traditional practices; as with musicians and dancers, the training for Circus acts has to begin at a very early stage. The close empathy and interdependence required in the team work undertaken in all Travellers' work demand high levels of daily practice under the direct control of the experienced elders. Such closeness has other benefits; no elderly Traveller is left alone or neglected; equally, individual suffering and death affect many more than the immediate relatives. For these reasons the requirement to educate their children to the State's satisfaction creates a tension between satisfying their own societal cultural existence and the perceived advantages of a school education. For them the value of formal book learning has not been 'proved', particularly where the deferred long term rewards of paper qualifications can lead to a lowered performance in traditional family skills and cultural interactions. It is ironic that the moral and social values which they (and settled society) value are seen to be better secured outside of schooling.

Mobility brings difficulties which under present school and curricular organisation have a major impact on continuity and coherence in teaching and learning. Even for the most 'deserving' of absentees, eg the child with chronic illness, the inevitable result of interrupted attendance seems to be reduced achievement \((15)\). This does not necessarily imply that more attendance would be the resolution, but rather that adequate and effective alternatives to support learning while out of the classroom are actually essential for many pupils at some time. The latest SOEID paper on Special Educational Needs shows a recognition of this, "Clarification should cover authorities' responsibility for pupils at home, absent from school or outwith the home area through long term or periodic illness and recuperation" \((16)\).
But, for the absentee who is viewed as 'non-deserving', whose parents support and condone absences, blame and censure are attributed, with few calls to offer relevant alternatives to motivate and engage the learner and the family. How is a School Board to react to the demand for public revelation of attendance and achievement levels, especially when for the school which successfully maintains and supports the learning of a previously little or unschooled group it may be compared unfavourably with a similar school which does not meet this challenge and has better statistics to show? Quantifying a narrow set of indicators tells a different story to the reality of a qualitative shift. The new Setting Targets initiative (17) will test headteachers' (and School Boards?) abilities to cope with the impossible task of setting targets for children who may enrol at any stage at any time and for any length of stay, often with limited or no previous school experience. Rather than receive censure, for low levels of achievement such a school should be praised for attracting and supporting Traveller enrolments.

What is a good school?

Travellers, in common with other parents, exercise their right to choice of school. They use word of mouth and prior experience to identify supportive learning and social environments for their children. Schools which receive regular requests from Travellers to enrol and experience subsequent revisits are good schools. In any unhappy or negative experience they simply walk with their feet and are rarely pursued. Do School Boards take cognisance of such positive, if unrecorded affirmation, or of the dissatisfaction being expressed through rejection of the school? They ought to, for HMI inspections now regularly include queries on Travellers' presence and attendance rates. They take care to record the good practice they see at encouraging and supporting Traveller pupils (18). Any school with an official Traveller site or Fair nearby yet few Traveller enrolments should be reviewing their practice and set targets to actively increase enrolments as well as attendance and achievement levels. What responsibility do School Boards have in ensuring that all children in their locale are enrolled at a school or are otherwise educated? Are there legal implications or is it more a social and moral issue? What advice or instructions are they given on this?

At European level it has been recognised that for children to enrol in several different schools each session is counter-productive to achieving their full potential. But there is a reluctance to force individual states to face the inherently exclusive nature of the predominance of 'local' schools: local signifies the integrative nature of school in its community, yet local can mean parochial and inward looking with self-regarding and self-protecting practices dominating if no will exists to ensure equity for all who can make a legitimate claim to a school place. At present, although guidance has been given to all local authorities in Scotland, Travellers still do not enjoy a legal right to maintain their place at a winter-base school while they are away travelling for the summer season. Such overt discrimination against an accepted life-style and ethnic and cultural values is considered a rights issue, but leaves individual families exposed and at the mercy of chance and individual good will. But who should monitor the right to a meaningful education? Is there a role here for the School Board in evaluating its school's effectiveness?

PARTNERSHIPS, POSITIVE PROGRESS AND POSSIBILITIES

Despite the serious difficulties for Travellers and for schools there are some signs of progress, albeit on a piece-meal basis throughout Europe.
For the Show Travellers in Scotland the last five years have been ones of steady pressure but slow improvements. The Glasgow winter-base schools welcome them and support their learning within the limits of the flexibility of their staffing and resources. Show pupils now are assured of remaining on the roll while travelling and in Secondary schools subject choices are made before moving out in the early spring so that places are reserved for their return in October / November. Schools provide packs of materials to accompany the children, to be completed, returned for marking and updated materials given out. But this is only a stop gap measure; children need teaching and such packs are not true open or distance learning materials.

This problem has been recognised and attempts made to redress the situation through joint European initiatives using SOCRATES and Leonardo funds. While some States have Unions and Associations of Occupational Travellers they were not able to lobby successfully for educational reforms on an individual basis. The need for concerted action prompted the initiation of the European Federation for the Education of Occupational Travellers, (EFECOT) in 1989. Since then it has acted as a clearing house for information, lobbied directly with the European Parliament, negotiated with the European Commission and secured funding for very many transnational projects focused on the educational needs of Travellers. The wishes, needs and aspirations of the various disparate groups are brought together and workable solutions are developed and piloted by committed educationalists. In a sense EFECOT performs for its client groups some of the functions that a School Board does for its parents; it promotes their interests, represents their case and mediates between providers and clients. EFECOT promotes partnerships: between families, Travellers, unions, teachers, associations, schools, colleges and universities, governmental and local authority departments. The developments in understanding, in appreciating and recognising the problems inherent to a mobile life style and in developing teaching methodologies have been commendable. But there is evidence that not all government departments have acted to effect positive change. In Scotland the last piece of advice directly from SED to Local Authorities was in April 1989 (19), although STEP, funded by the SOEID, has disseminated information and guidance to all local authority education departments (20). In England the DfEE, through the Section 488 funds promotes Traveller Education Support Services (TESS) as positive support for Travellers, but not all LEAs participate in the scheme. The TESS have been instrumental in raising awareness and in encouraging and supporting individual schools to take action.

In Netherlands central government funds support a network of travelling schools which accompany the larger Fairs. All children are required to attend regularly. The families on the smaller Fairs must send their children to any school within a 15 kilometre radius and have the right to a place and teaching during that short spell. In France families can claim vouchers to buy government devised distance learning materials to support their children's education while travelling and have access to tutor support provided at special centres. But it is Australia that can lay claim to the most appropriate model of learning support. In Central Queensland lobbying by the Show parents, principally the mothers, brought an agreement from the Government to provide teachers to accompany the state provided Distance Learning Materials. The parents had pointed out that they worked all day and evenings during the travelling season so could not act as tutors on a daily basis to their children. As a result special teachers are sent out periodically to support the larger Shows and some adults within the Show community were trained to act as tutors on a daily basis in between teachers' visits. Wherever possible during the longer stays the Show children are enrolled into a local school and are integrated into the social life and community of the school. Thus the
children enjoy a full education and maintain their strong cultural roots (21). This example of 'parent power' offers a model for further action.

The power of parents should not be underestimated as in most countries they are now perceived as clients and often have choice in schools and make a positive contribution to schools, more than simple fund-raising. It is ironic then that EFECOT has not put the empowerment of parents high on its list of actions, yet parental involvement is recognised as necessary in ensuring success in learning.

The Australian experience has demonstrated that even where centralised organisations can provide quality distance learning materials, the parents have demanded a service which supports their learning as a group rather than as isolated families; peer and adult tutoring were innovations suggested by the parents (22). The decision to opt for 'local' schools wherever possible is evidence of their desire to be part of 'mainstream', to belong and to be included. This desire seems to permeate the aspirations of the various Traveller groups in many countries. Yet local authority education departments, individual schools and School Boards remain largely ignorant of this and are unprepared to facilitate these desires.

The UK/EFECOT working group on Distance Learning attempted to redress this situation through the production of a video "Between Two Worlds", a staff development pack "What Is Your School Doing For Travellers?" and a booklet for teachers on preparing quality distance learning packs for children to take away with them. These have been disseminated to each local authority in the UK, yet there is little follow up action to be seen.

The Education Liaison Officers (ELOs) acting as mediators between the Show community and schools have been effective in the UK at securing local recognition of their case for a more appropriate education. Some work closely with schools and their Boards to negotiate for support from the LEA. Glasgow City Council has agreed to provide hand-held pupil records for the Show children to take with them during the travelling season to use in the schools they visit. Continuity and coherence should be more likely together with less opportunity to be put at the back of the class and left to get on with it on their own. The STEP Conferences asked for support from all local authorities to make sure that schools understood the need for these records to be completed. By the year 2000 we will know how effective this initiative has been.

INTERRUPTED LEARNING - THE ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARDS

The situation of Travellers who lead a mobile life-style offers a paradigm for the situation of many other interrupted learners, pupils who have to spend some time out of their school, or who are forced through home circumstances to enrol in many different schools. Have their needs been brought to the attention of School Boards? Do they consider them when reviewing the school development plans and spending plans? Do they accept and support these children's claim to an appropriate education?

There will be some who are seen as 'theirs' and who will enjoy more positive support as a result, e.g. those with chronic and deteriorating illnesses. Yet even they are allocated only a few hours of teaching a week, if they are fortunate to live in an authority which provides Home Tuition. The
teacher sent to the child's home is not their own teacher, but a stranger who does not know them or their work habits, and has often no direct contact with the school. This approach can hardly be described as ensuring continuity and coherence.

Others who do belong to the school but are absent for social/family reasons, such as ethnic minority pupils on extended visits to their 'home' country or young pregnant schoolgirls, are not viewed so sympathetically. Will the School Board agree to meet their needs? For the Travellers who get moved frequently, the truants and drop-outs, who monitors the relevance of the provision at the school? What responsibility is taken for motivating those who find learning in school difficult?

Are School Boards, even when willing, capable of taking on such roles? Would it not be appropriate to give them some grounding or training in how to represent the whole school community, how to cope with the challenges and stress that this entails? If they are to perform a valuable and valued function for society they too must be valued and given the tools to do the job properly. They deserve no less as guardians of our schools.

REFERENCES:

1. Resolution (75) 13 containing recommendations on the social situation of nomads in Europe. 22/05/1975


4. Resolution No 89/C 153/01 (No C 153/2). Resolution on the education of children of Occupational Travellers.

5. Resolution No 89/C 153/02 (No C 153/3). Resolution on school provision for gypsy and traveller children. 22/05/1989


9. Repressive actions. ?


