

Equality and Dialogue in the Involvement of Traveller Parents in the Preschool Education of Their Children

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Introduction

Children of the Traveller community do not receive the same benefits from education as their non-Traveller peers (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2006: 37). This paper reports on exploratory focus groups with Traveller mothers in which they discuss education, and in particular their own children's experience of school and preschool. These focus groups are part of a wider project looking at the involvement of Traveller parents in their children's preschool education.

Parental involvement is promoted by recent policy documents (DES, 2003; 2005a; b; 2006). Parents are not a homogeneous group, and as noted by Vincent and Martin (2005: 114), parent is a "*raced, classed and gendered*" term. In this paper, the policy and theoretical background to Traveller education is briefly outlined and major findings of the exploratory focus groups are presented. It is argued that structures for parental involvement must address the issue of equality, and must involve a dialogue rooted in respect for difference.

Background

The *Survey of Traveller Education Provision* (DES, 2005b) reports that most Traveller parents have high expectations for their children in the education system. Parents expressed concern about the attainment levels of their children (DES, 2005b). Many had missed out on education themselves and "*this had created barriers to their own advancement and to their ability to play a full role in society*" (DES, 2005b: 64). They were anxious that their children should benefit from a good education, and they expressed the desire to gain more information on ways to support their children in achieving their potential (DES, 2005b).

Official attitudes and policies concerning Travellers have evolved over the years since the *Commission on Itinerancy* reported in 1963 (Government of Ireland, 1963). Major markers in this evolution were the reports of the *Travelling People Review Body* (Government of Ireland, 1983) and of the *Task Force on the Travelling Community* (Government of Ireland, 1995). Official thinking in the 1960s regarded Travellers as "*deviant, destitute dropouts from Irish society*" (Lodge and Lynch, 2004: 93). More recent documents have been informed by a recognition that difference does not imply deficit and this has been matched with a shift from a policy of assimilation in early documents towards policies based on equality and partnership.

Parental involvement in education can be justified on the basis of effectiveness or of parental rights. The effectiveness of parental involvement has been well established in educational research (e.g. meta-analyses by Jeynes 2004; 2005) and there is widespread agreement that parental involvement is a key element in addressing educational difficulties faced by Travellers (DES, 2003; 2005a; 2005b). In relation to Traveller education, the Chief Inspector has said, "*the role of parents as partners in education must be developed*" (DES, 2005b: V) and all schools contacted for the *Survey of Traveller Education Provision* "*appreciated the importance of fostering involvement by parents*" (DES, 2005b: 73). An evaluation by the DES of the Traveller preschools (DES, 2003), recommends that each preschool develop and implement policy to encourage parental involvement and that this should be developed in consultation with the parents.

Apart from its effectiveness in improving educational outcomes, parental involvement can also be seen as a right. *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (Government of Ireland, 1937) acknowledges the family as the prime and natural educator of the child, and it is inherent in democracy that people should be involved in decisions which affect them. According to Vincent and Martin (2005: 124), because schools are made up of children from diverse cultural and social backgrounds, and in order to "*maintain a legitimate and democratic authority, the schools must engage in dialogue and negotiation with families.*"

Policies and structures for parental involvement need to take account of equality and culture. Different parents experience involvement differently. Hanafin and Lynch (2002: 45) show how working class parents often feel "*uninvolved, unrepresented and powerless*". Similar issues arise with respect to ethnicity (Vincent and Martin, 2005). Equality is not just about equal participation and outcomes, but also about showing respect for difference; according to Fraser and Honneth (2003), it is about recognition as well as redistribution.

Methodology

Two exploratory focus groups were held with Traveller mothers. A focus group allows for the interaction of the people involved and can help to "*flesh out*" views and information (Punch, 2005: 172). It puts the researcher in a more peripheral role; the important information comes from the group's interaction with each other (Cohen *et al.* 2003: 288). The focus group is used in this research as a qualitative method which can, according to Smith (2005: 103), "*create space for dialogue across difference.*" One of the two focus groups participating in this particular study, was contacted through a Traveller preschool and consisted of six mothers whose children were attending preschool at the time. The second group was contacted through a Traveller organisation and consisted of three mothers whose children were in first and second level schooling and who did not at that time have children in preschool. Questions to both groups covered the same broad themes: the mothers' expectations and hopes for their children's education, their

perceptions of their children's experience of school/preschool, and their relationships and involvement with teachers and with school/preschool. In all cases, open questions were put to the groups and the participants were encouraged to discuss the questions amongst themselves.

Findings

The mothers made it clear that they wanted their children to finish school, to gain qualifications and generally to achieve to the same level as their settled peers. They were aware that their children were not, for the most part, doing as well as settled children. They believed that Traveller children were generally already behind their peers in primary school, before they ever entered second level.

There was a sense of dismay at the continuing difficulties experienced by Traveller children over many years. One mother told of how her own parents were convinced of the value of education and so travelled only during the Summer and not during the school year. She says, *"my parents were adamant because they weren't able to read and write themselves and they wanted to make sure that we did."* However, of seven children in her family, only two had left school being able to read and write.

Some of the mothers felt that Traveller children are not being *"pushed"*, and that teachers set harder work for the settled children. One mother said, *"I think Traveller children don't do well in school because there isn't proper teaching for them"*. Another said, *"I have a young one, she's gone 12, she can't read or write."* One mother related how she had been led to believe that her children were doing very well in primary school, yet when they went on to second level she found that they needed support to get them to the standard of the other children. These mothers believed that Traveller children are capable of achieving to the same extent as their settled peers.

The mothers were strong in support of education. According to one, *"even if [Traveller children] are not achieving, you still end up sending them to school to make sure they pick up something"*, while another put it more strongly:

"Education is key to power - if one generation of Travellers gets off the ground in terms of education, we'll never look back after that. We'll get our [children] into positions where they'll be guards, solicitors, and that's when real change is going to happen for Travellers."

The mothers acknowledged the positive work of many teachers. However, they also reported a range of difficulties that they had experienced with particular teachers. They felt that some teachers had no interest in Travellers and others were strongly opposed to them and did not want them in school. Some of the mothers claimed that their children

had been on the receiving end of negative remarks and attitudes by certain teachers. One mother, whose son was the only Traveller in his class, claimed that his teacher had told the other pupils not to mix with him because as a Traveller he would be a bad influence on them. This mother spoke of advising her son to "*go in and do your best.*" She claimed that he replied, "*how can you do your best when she is on your back every minute of the day?*" This mother added,

"If you have a teacher that doesn't like Travellers it can affect how she speaks to the child and how she acts with the child ... the [other] children then pick up on how the teacher is approaching this child."

Perhaps due to such experiences, the mothers were somewhat sceptical about what they could achieve through contact with the school. Although they said that they generally feel welcome when they visit school, this differs considerably depending on the school and the teacher - "*some teachers are different to others.*" One mother said that schools show "*no respect for Traveller parents.*" Another said, in reference to her dealings with a particular school principal, "*you are coming against this person who doesn't have any time for Travellers.*"

Most of the mothers claimed that their children had been subjected to racist comments from other pupils. They said that name calling in school was the same as when they themselves were in school, with regular use of pejorative terms. They said it was worse for children as they got older, as they became more aware of it. It was suggested by some that the way the schools deal with racial name calling is different for Travellers than it is for other minority groups: "*when it comes to Travellers, you're supposed to sit back and not take notice.*" However, in response to this another mother cautioned that one way "*to keep discrimination going is to pit [members of minority groups] against each other.*" One mother suggested that teachers should receive anti-racism training in order to be able to provide "*Traveller-friendly education*" and to deal with racism in the classroom.

The mothers perceived a gulf between home and school, with one saying, "*when they get [to school] there's a big barrier.*" They felt that Traveller identity was not recognised or respected in the schools. One mother said, "*the schools were designed for a settled person's approach. They were never designed for Travellers.*" Another, who claimed that her children were receiving a good education in their school, nonetheless said that their Traveller identity was not acknowledged. She added, "*if Traveller culture was included in the school curriculum ... it would make all the difference ... it would break down barriers for settled and Traveller.*"

The mothers discussed their children's experience of preschool. They said that attendance at preschool benefited the children because when they moved on to primary "*they knew*

more and had learned more". Some mothers whose children attended a Traveller preschool said that they chose it, not to keep their children away from settled children but that *"they were used to it and felt comfortable with the teacher and the preschool."* They talked to their children about what they had done in preschool and related examples of what the children had told them about their day. They believed that it was very important that their children got attention from the staff and that the small numbers and informal nature of the preschools facilitated this compared with the larger classes in primary school. Yet the parents stated that they did not feel involved with the preschool. One mother said, *"I don't think we are involved very much with it"* and she added that she would like to be more involved. This was echoed by the other parents.

In relation to involvement in their children's primary and second level education, the mothers said that they visit the schools when they have a concern about a child's education. The mothers also talked about how they try to help their children with homework: *"there's a lot we'd be able to help with but then there's a lot of new stuff."* Some reported difficulty in helping children because of their own literacy problems. One mother explained how a particular teacher had shown her how to help her son with his English reading.

Conclusion

This paper reports on the findings of exploratory focus groups with Traveller mothers. These mothers see themselves as advocates for their children's education and work hard to try to help them. The mothers expressed concern that their children were not succeeding to the same extent as their settled peers. Some reported negative school experiences for their children, which in many ways, mirrored their own experiences of school. Acknowledging positive support from individual teachers, they also spoke of the low expectations that many teachers appeared to have for their children. They perceived that a lack of recognition of Traveller identity within the classroom led to a gulf between home and school for the children.

The poor educational outcomes for Traveller children and the barriers to communication between Traveller families and schools need to be addressed. Structures for parental involvement need to be put in place which acknowledge Traveller identity and culture and which facilitate dialogue between families and schools. Traveller preschools are an ideal site to initiate such a process, due to the positive relationships which already exist.

The mothers were strongly in support of education, but perceived resistance from the schools in many cases and also reported incidents of discrimination within the schools. They were more positive about their children in preschool, due to the small numbers, the relationship with staff and the informal setting.

These mothers involve themselves in their children's education and advocate on their behalf. However, while they visit the schools for many reasons, it is never as partners. A model of parental involvement is required which acknowledges the parents' Traveller identity and which facilitates a dialogue rooted in respect for difference.

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