

**GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR ENGLISH
TRAVELLER EDUCATION SUPPORT SERVICES:
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT DOES NOT
EQUAL SOCIAL INCLUSION**

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Introduction

It is well established that schools can be hostile and frightening places for children of ethnic minorities (see for example Garcia, 1999; Partington, 1998; Troyna, 1993). While debate continues about the enduring links between formal education and racism, most commentators agree that schools generally function as agents of the state in reproducing the dominant culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), which is almost by definition opposed to the existence and expression of minority cultures. All of this suggests that when government policy is directed explicitly at ‘improving’ schools, it might be considered reasonable to expect that this ‘improvement’ will lead to some positive changes in the educational experiences and opportunities of ethnic minorities.

This paper demonstrates that such an assumption is a fallacy, certainly in relation to the particular ethnic minority considered here: Travellers. We argue below that the Blair Government’s pursuit of its School Improvement agenda, manifested through changes to funding of Traveller education, actually contradicts and hinders its laudable but increasingly sidelined Social Inclusion policy. This policy ‘mismatch’ needs to be seen against the background of Ozga’s (2000) assertion that “New Labour’s response” to “deep-rooted, intractable and multi-faceted problems such as poverty, unemployment and poor health” is “modernisation, in particular modernisation of government” (p. 92). Furthermore, “Modernised government is powerful, interventionist and knows best. Its contract with the public lies in ensuring effective delivery of outcomes”

(p. 92). However, on this occasion at least, access policy outcomes are being sacrificed for uneven (and hence inequitable) achievement policy outcomes.

Background

Traveller education has been recognised for having achieved a great deal for Traveller children, generally against a backdrop of negative stereotypes from the mainstream ‘settled’ community and government education and social policies that have rarely displayed a comprehensive understanding of Travellers’ situations (see for example Bakari, 2000; Kiddle, 1999, 2000). Of course, this situation is by no means unique to England, with Travellers and nomads in countries as diverse as Australia (Danaher, 1998), Ireland, (Kenny, 1997), Nigeria (Umar & Tahir, 2000) and the United States (Flores, 1996) experiencing similar marginalisation.

Social Inclusion documents from DfEE include Travellers in their categories of pupils most at risk of exclusion from school, not just in the sense of fixed term and permanent exclusions, but also in the sense of disappearing from the system or not having access to it in the first place. It is well documented that many Traveller pupils have only intermittent access to school and that some have no access at all. It is also a matter of record that the educational achievement of those monitored by Traveller Education Services is below that of their peers (Ofsted, 1996; DfEE, 1998). Travellers as a group pose a challenge to education systems for both access and achievement, for both agendas of Social Inclusion and School Improvement.

The two main factors in making special support systems available to Local Education Authorities (LEAs) for Traveller children are those of mobility and ethnicity. DfEE understood that these were important factors in gaining access to school and in achieving in a system designed for people who stay largely in one place. This examination of funding arrangements and DfEE expectations of Traveller Education Services suggests that conflicts between the two main Government agendas in education discriminate disproportionately against Traveller children. It will be seen how the Government appears to have shifted its priorities for Traveller children from access (Social Inclusion) to achievement (School Improvement), with no recognition of the complexities of the interplay of mobility and ethnicity.

Funding

Before the 1988 Education Reform Act, the particular needs of Traveller children were met financially by a funding system called the 'no-area pool'. LEAs claimed retrospectively each year for funding in respect of highly mobile pupils moving in and out of their areas. High mobility was recognised as creating a specific set of challenges for both pupils and schools. Some LEAs set up centrally run Services to support pupils included in 'no-area pool' funding. With mobility as the major factor, it is not surprising that some Services included children of members of the Armed Forces as well as Traveller children in their remit.

Following the Swann Report (Swann, 1985), in which Travellers were identified as an ethnic minority group with particular difficulties in gaining access to education, the 1988 Education Reform Act (Section 210) gave powers to DfEE to pay grant in respect of Traveller education. In 1989 LEAs were invited to bid for funding for centrally run projects to commence in 1990 to support the following categories of Traveller:

- Travellers on authorised Gypsy sites
- Travellers on unauthorised sites (Roadsiders)
- Fairground/Circus children
- New Travellers
- Travellers settled in housing for less than two years.

Mobility was still the uniting factor of the groups for whom provision was made under Section 210 grant, although, with the addition of Travellers housed for less than two years, there was growing awareness of the effect of ethnicity on access to and achievement in education. Systematic evaluation of Traveller education was initiated with the new funding arrangements. Indeed, the instigation of the Annual Report was a major factor in the development of DfEE understanding of the dimensions of Traveller communities in England. Previously much valuable work had been done by the National Association of Teachers of Travellers (NATT), founded in 1980 by a group of teachers concerned to raise awareness of Traveller issues and to provide support to teachers of Travellers, many of whom worked in isolation, but there was a lack of national data.

In 1999, the funding for Traveller education was, in a radical and unexpected move, transferred to the Standards Fund and merged with the Ethnic Minorities Achievement Grant (EMAG) to form a new grant called EMTAG. This move clearly located the perceived 'problem' of Travellers in their culture rather than their mobility and, by inference, in their achievement in education rather than their access to it. It also highlighted that the collection of data for DfEE over the previous ten years had done little to raise their understanding of Traveller education. It is interesting that in one of the DfEE's own research reports, Dobson and Henthorne (1999) recognise that 'Travellers' mobility led to difficulties in access to schooling, but this finding did not make its way into the thinking behind the new funding arrangements.

Access and achievement

LEAs showed a degree of confusion about the nature and scope of Traveller education by their decisions about placement of Traveller Education Services in their support service structures. Those LEAs that perceived the needs of Travellers to be related to their mobility tended to place their Traveller Services in the management structure of Pupil Support Services, whilst those that perceived the needs to be related to ethnicity tended to place them alongside Ethnic Minority Services. However, by the mid 1990s the experience of Services and the developing role of NATT as a professional association for teachers of Travellers combined to produce a (more or less) common view on the scope and

nature of Traveller education. Access and achievement were the main aims, with **both** mobility and ethnicity seen as the major influencing factors.

In 1998 at the NATT national conference the then Minister for Education praised Traveller Education Services for the significant and steady improvements made in the two main aims of access and achievement, and recognised the contribution made by committed teachers with specialist expertise. However, in targets set for the first time for Travellers' involvement in education and in the information required for future funding, only achievement was recognised. Access to education for Travellers was ignored. Figures for enrolment at school and access to school of Roadside Travellers, which would have been accurate indicators of effectiveness in making provision for highly mobile pupils, were no longer required. Continuity of education and progression within it were to be judged only by achievement of Traveller pupils in national tests and against national expectations.

By the late 1990s, it was clear to Traveller Education Services that access to education for Travellers was becoming even more difficult to achieve, for the following main reasons:

- The publication of leagues tables for schools in achievement in SATs and GCSEs and the setting of school targets in literacy and numeracy
- The decrease in flexibility of school places as a result of fewer 'surplus' places and the class-size regulations applied to Key Stage 1

- The effects of the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act in speeding evictions of Travellers from unauthorised sites and Travellers' subsequent unwillingness for their children to be in school for short periods.

All three reasons need examination, but here we will address only the first. Traveller Education Services report growing resistance in schools to the admission of Traveller children. The reasons are clear and usually articulated by Headteachers: they fear that they will not reach their targets for achievement if they admit children who achieve less well than their peers for any reason. They explain that it's not racist – they would be unwilling to admit **any** child who may cause them to fail to reach their targets. This was particularly noticeable when the child concerned was in a SATs year, but the trend is to put up objections to the admission of Traveller children whatever the year they are in.

The average time taken to arrange school places for Travellers has increased significantly, as has the necessity for involving LEAs in directing schools to admit Traveller children. Dual registration regulations are flouted each spring as Traveller children in SATs years disappear from school registers when they go travelling so that 'they don't bring down the percentages'. It is hard to blame schools for their lack of inclusion when Government pressures on them to meet targets are stronger than its commitment to equal opportunities and social inclusion. In the case of Traveller children, social inclusion works directly against school improvement (as measured in SATs and GCSEs).

Understanding of the achievement of Traveller children has been confused by the publication by Ofsted (1999) of claims that Gypsy Travellers were seriously underachieving. The only data available for Traveller pupil's achievement is that provided by Traveller Education Services. LEAs are unable to track Travellers as members of an ethnic minority unless parents have so described their children on ethnic monitoring forms, which provide, no category for Travellers to choose apart from 'other', and so there is no systematic monitoring of Traveller children. The data available through Traveller Education Services' Annual Reports excludes Traveller children settled in housing. In addition, most Services do not monitor the achievement of Traveller children who are expected to meet national expectations in SATs and GCSEs and who do not receive extra support. To make claims for the achievement of Traveller children when only a minority is monitored is misleading and ultimately damaging to Traveller children's chances of inclusion in schools.

Conclusion

In a move equally surprising to that of the inclusion of Traveller education in EMAG, Traveller education has been unlinked from it for the application round for funding for 2001. The DfEE Civil Servant given responsibility for streamlining the Standards Fund, although at first willing only to consult on proposed changes in broad outline, had discussions with practitioners in Traveller education and became aware of the complexities inherent in the interplay of Travellers' mobility and culture and in the work of Traveller Education Support Services. As a result of these discussions, Traveller education

has been uncoupled from EMAG and has no further requirement to devolve money to schools (it is always difficult to predict which schools might have need of funding for highly mobile pupils), and practitioners have been invited to join consultations with DfEE on minimum standards and on formulae for funding and for target setting.

Schools cannot be allowed to improve the level of pupils' achievement at the expense of inclusion and equality; if they do not progress hand in hand there is no improvement. The challenge for schools to change to fit the needs of pupils rather than changing the pupil to fit the school must be met in imaginative ways and followed by a development of the understanding that DfEE has reached about the needs of Traveller pupils. The next step must be for DfEE to talk to Traveller families, to find out what are their expectations of education and their aspirations for their children. Until the education system can change and grow in response to the needs of all pupils, including those who are highly mobile and from cultures other than white and middle class, there will be children with limited or no access to education and no chance of achieving within it. This policy mismatch demonstrates starkly the truth of Brady's (2000) assertion: "Unfortunately, more often than not, behind legislation and new initiatives lie a gross lack of understanding of education" (p. 35).

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