

**David Simpson**  
**Save the Children**

## **Roma EDEM education seminar**

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### **TRANSITIONS**

This presentation aims to explore a few of the issues relating to the transition into primary school, and from primary into post-primary. Of course there's also the transition from post-primary into whatever lies ahead – a job, no job, marriage and family, a sense of social inclusion or not – but time precludes looking at this in any detail and perhaps it leads neatly into the seminar later this year around employment.

One starting point is to look at a couple of key statistics, one from each end of the school continuum. There are very few statistics available in relation to Traveller children's education – indeed, that's one of the problems – and the accuracy of those statistics that there are is also an issue. But these two statistics do at least indicate the extent of the problem or challenge with education:

- In 1999, only 18% of Traveller children were thought to access pre-school or nursery, compared to 56% of children overall **(DE,2000)**
- 59% of Travellers (16-24) leave school with no qualifications, compared to 17% of the 16-24 population overall **(2001 Census)**

When I came across the first of these statistics in 2002 it seemed likely that the gap was already widening. The pre-school expansion programme was starting to offer a place for every child whose parents wanted one. On the other hand, almost all Traveller children who went to pre-school did so in 'on site' Traveller support group provision and these were under increasing pressures, for funding or other reasons. The Newry Traveller pre-school in particular had already closed.

It's obviously too simplistic to say that there's a direct correlation between these two statistics, between the lack of pre-school opportunities and the lack of qualifications by school leaving age. But it is reasonable to say that there's a general correlation, and that participation by Traveller children in good quality pre-schooling is a significant factor in future educational opportunities.

In 2000, the Promoting Social Inclusion working group on Travellers, which I was part of, made a recommendation about this.

The core of that recommendation was:

- The Department of Education should establish a targeted initiative aimed at promoting use of integrated (off site) nursery and pre-school provision by Travellers.

Although the recommendation did go on to talk about improving support to 'on site' provision where necessary, we focused on integrated provision because we felt it was more educationally desirable, more sustainable, and would make transition for children to integrated primary schools easier than if they were coming from a Traveller-only pre-school environment. The 'targeted initiative' was intended to include a focus on working with parents to provide the confidence that their child would be safe, respected and happy in an integrated setting, and that practical barriers – e.g. transport – would be examined.

This consideration by the PSI group of the different elements of the 'integrated versus Traveller-only' debate in relation to pre-schools is of particular relevance when contrasted with the elevation by statutory bodies of 'parental choice' over other determinants when considering the issue of primary education for Traveller children in Belfast. I'll come back to that issue in a few minutes.

In its response to the PSI report in 2002, Government accepted this part of the pre-school recommendation, undertaking:

- To initiate a 2-3 year drive to enhance the participation of Traveller children in integrated nursery and pre-school education, during the period April 2003 – April 2005

and pointing out that flexibility of funding by the Pre-school Education Advisory Groups was already being applied for Traveller children, although this was largely in Traveller-only provisions.

It seems regrettable that two-and-a-half years later, and five years after the recommendation was first made, there has in fact been no Government 'drive' to increase Traveller children's participation in pre-school, and that the existence of funding flexibility for places is still being put forward as *the* indicator of progress. This seems incomprehensible when everyone concerned acknowledges the significant advantage which a Traveller children with experience of pre-schooling has over a child who hasn't had that experience, at the point when both enter primary school.

The main 'good practice' in this area currently appears to be the Toybox project, a three-year partnership between NIPPA the early years organisation, Save the Children and Traveller Movement NI. Funded by the Children's

Fund and Save the Children, and with eight development staff, the project provides a one-to-one home-based play and early years development service for Traveller children aged 0-4. Working in Belfast, Derry, Strabane, Coalisland, Armagh, Dungannon, Newry and South Armagh, Toybox is presently working with 120 children from 90 families. One specific objective of the project, by developing relationships with parents and pre-schools and nursery schools, is to increase the enrolment of Traveller children in pre-schools in both 'on site' and integrated settings, and there are strong indications that some progress is being made.

Among other good practice initiatives, one being planned for September 2005 is the Southern Education & Library Board's 'preparedness for school' project, which aims to develop an induction pack aimed at schools and parents for children eligible to be enrolled in pre-school or primary school, and to include in-service training for school staff around the help which children and parents may need. Alongside this the Southern Board hopes to develop a set of standardised measurements of children's school readiness, which will show the extent to which children attending pre-school do better, and it intends to use this to actively promote the benefits of a pre-school experience.

So there is some evidence of good practice happening, although it is critically hampered by short term funding, patchy co-operation or the absence of joined up working, and – it would seem – the lack of a strategic vision, underpinned by adequate resources, which is capable of setting clear targets for raising the participation of Traveller children in pre-school on a North of Ireland-wide basis and thus providing a springboard for equal participation with settled children by the time they enter into primary education.

Five years after the Department assessed participation in pre-school within the population overall at 56%, it has now risen closer to 95%. Has the gap for Traveller participation closed? Obviously not. Has the level of Traveller participation increased from its 2000 estimate of 17%? The fact is that no-one at the moment knows for sure, though any really significant increase seems unlikely, and the Toybox is the most likely contributor to any increase.

While pre-school participation is not a panacea for the education challenges Travellers face, it is such an obviously critical area that there remains an urgent need for the targeted initiative promised three years ago by the Department. There is a need for statutory funding (from Education and Health) to guarantee the future of Toybox as a regional initiative after its three-year funding ends, given the universal recognition of the valuable role it is playing. There is a need for the elements of partnership, between voluntary and statutory, and across statutory boundaries, which sometimes currently exist but only at a local project level, to be scaled up to meet this challenge. And through that partnership, for real targets to be set and for good local practice to be rolled out on a regional basis as Toybox has been.

Moving on to consider some of the transition issues of the primary / post – primary interface, it is clear that – at a local level – there are also some examples of improved practice. St. Mary's primary school in Belfast, for

example, partners with post-primary schools for a three-day induction process in the final term for P7 pupils due to transfer. St. Joseph's secondary school in Coalisland will be liaising with the local Traveller support group about children due to transfer in September 2005.

Are these examples of improved practice common to all schools that transfer and receive Traveller children? As with the issue of transition and school readiness at pre-school and primary level, there is little evidence of a strategic approach, or of the setting of targets, or of the development of a working partnership approach with local Traveller support groups and other voluntary organisations as a critical resource in the transfer and retention of children in post-primary schools. It may be that the recent work of the Education & Training Inspectorate in reviewing practices in schools which have Traveller children will lead to guidelines for good practice, but without the setting of targets at Board level and across the North of Ireland it seems unlikely that progress, where made at all, will ever be more than painfully slow.

The fact that many children either never make the transition to post-primary, or begin their withdrawal from formal education shortly after transition, should not be attributed simply to Travellers' lifestyle or culture. Of course this is a real factor, and some elements of it, such as decent accommodation and the prospect of employment, lie beyond the particular remit of education to address. But there is a need to tackle what can be tackled, and to drive forward through Government a strategy that builds on good local practice where it exists – things like afterschools projects and homework clubs, and part school/part training initiatives as in Derry and the Southern Board's proposed 'Inclusion in Education' project, and the existing Munia Tober alternative education project for young women in Belfast – and to develop these local examples on a regional basis with adequate resources and clear and measurable targets for improvement. A lot of the good practice, although under-resourced, and an equal measure of the commitment, resides within the voluntary sector, and if there was one single element that would make a sea-change to developing a more strategic approach it would be the creation of real, equal partnership between the statutory and voluntary sectors.

The issue of primary to post-primary transition can't be discussed honestly without reference to St. Mary's. It's an indication of the sensitivity that surrounds this issue that the Department has recently produced a research study on Traveller children's experiences in post-primary schools without mentioning St. Mary's at all or exploring whether children's experiences of primary education in a Traveller-only environment had any impact on their subsequent adjustment to post-primary school. It seems almost incredible that, while both the Department and CCMS state their commitment to integrated education for Traveller children, they have elevated parental choice in favour of St. Mary's to a position greater than it enjoys in any other education context.

St. Mary's is a good and caring school, providing good education by committed teachers to Traveller children in Belfast. Education & Training Inspectorate reports consistently show that standards are rising. And parental

choice is important but not the only important issue. It might be more valid and certainly honest to argue that St. Mary's exists because Traveller children wouldn't get a better education in any other primary school in West Belfast, and that their education is more important than integration. But then, why aren't there Traveller-only primary schools outside Belfast or Traveller-only post-primary schools? There's just a suspicion that the existence of St. Mary's prevents having to deal with the probable opposition of some schools and some in the settled community to significant numbers of Traveller children enrolling in other schools in West Belfast. It's inconceivable that a similar solution would be found to deal with any other minority ethnic group of children.

This is a complex issue, and calling for the end of segregated schooling shouldn't be used as a slogan. But neither should parental choice be used in that way. There's a need to examine honestly, and perhaps to conduct some research, on whether or not there are specific social and educational benefits to having a Traveller-only primary school, and whether there are any social and educational impacts – good and bad – for children's subsequent transfer to integrated post-primary schools. At least the best interests of children should stand alongside parental choice as factors in the debate, and the Department should actively explore what an active integration strategy would involve rather than simply holding up Travellers' parental choice as though (on this one issue) it were a holy grail.

There's only been the opportunity in this presentation to touch on a small handful of the issues that relate to school transitions. Its intention has therefore been to suggest a few of the problems, some of the good practice, what might be needed to decrease one and increase the other, and provide an opening for further discussion within smaller groups.

So, to summarise some of the key points, there is - I believe – a need:

- To develop a specific drive to increase Traveller children's participation in pre-school education, including working with parents to build confidence and commitment towards this
- To ensure that the proven success of the Toybox project is sustained after its scheduled end in Autumn 2006
- To set clear and measurable targets for Traveller children's participation and attainment levels, and so to provide a framework for good practice existing at a local level, within an overall strategic vision
- To make a commitment to real partnership between statutory and voluntary education providers and Travellers themselves, at a strategic as well as project level, and including some form of interagency education forum
- To create the basis of trust and respect within which difficult issues can be fully discussed.

