

Parental Involvement: Irish Travellers and Early Years Education

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Abstract: This paper explores Traveller parents' involvement in Traveller preschools in Ireland. Travellers are a distinct cultural group who have experienced educational disadvantage. Against a backdrop of changing policy paradigms, Traveller preschools were established in the 1970s as a compensatory educational intervention. The study methodology was mainly qualitative, drawing on interpretivism, social constructivism and critical theory. Methods included document analysis, focus group and individual interviews, and a questionnaire survey. From a thematic analysis of the data, three overlapping themes emerged about Traveller parents' involvement in schools: how school culture facilitates parental involvement; parents' direct involvement in preschools; and parents' home-based activities supporting children's education and development. Travellers were extensively involved in various ways except formal decision-making. Traveller preschools were experienced as protected enclaves where parents felt welcome and accepted, and involved on an individual and familial level. This research highlights the importance of engaging in respectful ways with Traveller parents and acknowledging their educational involvement.

Keywords: Travellers, Ireland, Parents, Early Years Education, Qualitative Research, Ethnicity

L'implication des parents: Les Travellers irlandais et l'éducation précoce

Résumé: Cet article explore l'implication des Traveller parents dans les écoles Travellers en Irlande. Les Travellers sont un groupe culturel qui subit un désavantage au plan éducatif. Dans un contexte de changement de paradigmes politiques, les préscolaires Travellers furent établies durant les années 1970 comme intervention éducative compensatoire. La méthodologie d'étude était surtout qualitative, basée sur l'interprétivisme, le constructivisme social et la théorie critique. Les méthodes incluaient l'analyse de documents, le focus group, les interviews individuelles, et l'enquête. À partir d'une analyse thématique des données, trois thèmes superposés ressortent de cette implication des parents : combien la culture scolaire facilite cette implication; la participation directe des parents dans la préscolaire, les activités au foyer des parents qui appuient l'éducation et le développement de leurs enfants. Les Travellers étaient très impliqués de diverses manières, excepté dans la prise de décision formelle. Les Travellers

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préscolaires furent vécues comme des enclaves protectrices où les parents se sentaient bienvenus, acceptés et engagés au niveau individuel et familial. Cette recherche souligne l'importance de collaborer avec les parents Travellers et de reconnaître leur implication éducative.

Mots-Clés : Les Travellers; L'Irlande; L'éducation précoce; La recherche éducative; L'ethnicité.

Participación de los padres: los nómadas irlandeses y educación temprana

Resumen: Este artículo explora la participación de los padres en los centros preescolares de nómadas en Irlanda. Los nómadas son un grupo cultural particular que ha experimentado desventajas educativas. En un contexto de cambio de paradigmas políticos, los preescolares de los nómadas se establecieron en la década de 1970 como una intervención educativa compensatoria. La metodología de estudio es principalmente cualitativa, basada en la interpretación, el constructivismo social y la teoría crítica. Los métodos incluyen análisis de documentos, grupos focales y entrevistas individuales, así como una encuesta. A partir de un análisis temático de los datos, surgieron tres temas superpuestos sobre la participación de los padres de nómadas en las escuelas: cómo la cultura escolar facilita la participación de los padres; participación directa de los padres en preescolares; y actividades en el hogar de los padres que apoyan la educación y el desarrollo de los niños. Los nómadas se involucraron extensivamente de varias maneras, exceptuando la toma formal de decisiones. Los centros preescolares de nómadas se experimentaron como enclaves protegidos donde los padres se sintieron bienvenidos y aceptados, e involucrados a nivel individual y familiar. Esta investigación destaca la importancia de comprometerse de manera respetuosa con los padres de nómadas y reconocer su participación educativa.

Palabras clave: nómadas irlandeses, Irlanda, padres, educación temprana, investigación cualitativa, etnicidad

Introduction

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study of Traveller parents' involvement in Traveller preschools in Ireland. The Traveller community is a distinct cultural group in Ireland comprising less than one percent of the population. Its members have experienced, and continue to experience, social exclusion and educational disadvantage. Traveller preschools, which existed from the 1970s until 2011, were funded by the Department of Education to help address the educational difficulties experienced by Travellers. The topic of Traveller parental involvement practices is important as the involvement of parents in education is seen as one way of tackling educational disadvantage. This may be particularly important for Traveller parents because of their difficult relationship with the educational system. This study is distinctive in that it is the

only major study undertaken about Traveller preschools in Ireland and the only one to examine parental involvement practices within Traveller preschools.

Research methods

Setting for the research: Traveller preschools

Traveller preschools were among the initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes for Travellers. These developed in the dual context of government policy about Traveller education in Ireland and the emergence of international research in the 1960s identifying compensatory education approaches for minority and disadvantaged groups. The preschools were set up in the early 1970s by voluntary committees, with financial support from the Department of Education. By 2002, there were 52 Traveller preschools around the country (Department of Education, 2003). The inclusion of Traveller parents in the preschools was a policy focus throughout. A departmental evaluation of the preschools (Department of Education, 2003) recommended that parents of children attending the preschools be elected to management committees, and that each preschool draw up parental involvement policies, in consultation with parents and sensitive to Traveller culture. Traveller support services in Ireland were sorely affected by the economic downturn of the late 2000s, and government funding for Traveller preschools ceased in 2011 (Boyle, Flynn & Hanafin, 2018). This reflected occurrences in other countries where economic cuts mean that children at the margins such as Traveller students suffer most. In the UK, for example, the savage reduction in Traveller education services has been described as one of the most alarming outcomes of austerity politics (Ryder, 2017).

Research approach, sample, methods, analysis

Qualitative research prioritises process rather than outcome and allows for an emphasis on meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate within this study as it allowed for the generation of understanding about the specific experiences of Traveller parents as they dealt with, and made sense of, their interactions with Traveller preschools. The methodology drew on interpretivism, social constructivism and critical theory. Critical theory provided a lens for a consideration of power structures and issues of social justice in relation to Travellers.

A variety of methods was employed. A document analysis¹ of major state policy transitions between the 1960s and 2000s set out a background for the field research, which used methods to allow the Traveller voice to emerge (McCall, 2011). Participants in the study comprised Traveller parents of children attending specialist Traveller pre-schools as well as Traveller preschool managers and teachers. Interviews and focus groups were used to research participants' views using a prepared guide that contained questions for Traveller parents, focusing on their experiences of, and involvement in, Traveller preschools; and questions for managers and teachers about their experiences of Traveller parents in the Traveller preschools.

¹ A policy analysis of Irish state documents about Travellers and Traveller education is detailed in Boyle, Flynn & Hanafin (2018).

Six individual interviews and 6 focus groups interviews were held with a total of 36 Traveller parents at ten sites across the country. Individual interviews were conducted with 5 teachers and 3 pre-school managers, and 21 teachers completed a questionnaire survey. These interviews helped determine Traveller parents' reports of their involvement practices within the preschools. In addition, the questionnaire survey and individual interviews with teachers in Traveller preschools explored teachers' reports of the nature and extent of parental involvement practices and also elicited their perspectives on these practices.

Informed consent was given by all participants and ethical approval was received from the Dublin City University (DCU) Research Ethics Committee. A description of the research in plain English was set out in writing and verbally before each interview, to ensure that participants with varying levels of literacy were made aware of the purpose of the research. For participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for participants and names of school sites in the research were changed.

A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The recordings from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. The analysis of each data set began with each transcript being read in its entirety before notes were made outlining any interesting comments or findings. From there, codes were generated from each transcript in order to generate a list of initial themes. These preliminary themes were then reviewed separately and together by the authors, and refined and subsequently compared and contrasted in order to present the final findings. Three main themes emerged in relation to Traveller parents' involvement in the targeted early years education setting: school cultural facilitative factors; direct school involvement by Traveller parents; and home-based activities supportive of their children's education and development.

The research reported in this paper presents some methodological limitations, especially in terms of its unusual educational context and generalisability. At the same time, features of this specific and rare educational context allowed us to extract and illuminate the experiences of a hard-to-reach, marginalised ethnic minority as they engaged with an early years education setting. In this regard, Gillett, Clarke & O'Donoghue (2016, p. 601) draw on the notion of user generalisability (Burns, 1994) to suggest that the findings may serve to encourage educational practitioners, leaders and policy makers involved with hard-to-reach populations to reflect on their own experiences, and perhaps enable them to derive new insights, understandings and meanings.

Before turning to the findings, we present first a brief historical and contemporary context for Traveller education in Ireland; a brief overview of the Traveller preschools in which the research took place; and some elements of the literatures on parental involvement in schools that are particularly relevant to Traveller parents.

Context of the Research

Historical and contemporary policy context for Traveller education

An analysis of Irish state documents shows that a major paradigm shift occurred in the evolution of official views and policies concerning Travellers, and specifically Traveller education, during

the decades from the 1960s to the present, and also demonstrates how past policies and practices continue to have an impact on the present (Boyle et al., 2018).

Specifically, the policy of absorption and assimilation evident in early documents was replaced over the years with policies based more on concepts of equality and partnership. In the earlier documents, Travellers were seen as a people in deficit – a community of dropouts and deviants – and their culture was not perceived to have any validity or importance. Later documents demonstrated a growing recognition of Traveller culture and a determination to address issues concerning the education of Travellers in a spirit of interculturalism and inclusion. Policy development in relation to the Traveller community did not occur in a vacuum, rather, various reports were influenced by the dominant perspectives of their time. Certain theoretical perspectives recurred, which were also evident in Irish educational policy generally, *viz* consensualism, essentialism and meritocracy (O'Sullivan, 2005). This evolution in attitudes was matched by parallel developments in State policies. Early assimilationist policies and paternalistic approaches were replaced by concepts of partnership and participation. Nonetheless, a failure to address resourcing implications led ultimately to ethnic-blind policies, resulting in large reductions in education spending targeted at the Traveller community. It was within this context of evolving and shifting policy paradigms in Ireland that Traveller preschools were established.

Traveller preschools

Traveller preschools developed in the dual context of government policy regarding the education of Travellers and the emergence of international research in the 1960s regarding benefits that might be gained from a high-quality supported preschool intervention aimed at compensating for educational disadvantage. It had become apparent in the wake of the *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* (Government of Ireland, 1963) that Travellers were not receiving adequate schooling. The Department of Education (1970) identified young Traveller children as a category that would benefit from preschool education by acquainting them with the routine of school, thus making it easier for them to settle into primary school. The Department offered financial support and various voluntary groups applied for it and set up preschools around the country. There was further expansion in the number of schools in the 1980s and 1990s, accompanied by in-service training for teachers in Traveller preschools.

An evaluation undertaken by the Department of Education and Science (2003) noted a lack of clarity about who held responsibility for the preschools, and also found existence of a tension between the efforts at inclusiveness within society and the existence of separate provision, advising that “the location of further preschools in places that mark them out for the exclusive use of Travellers should be avoided” (Department of Education and Science, 2003, p. 35).

Specifically, in relation to parental involvement, the evaluation found that only a few preschools had parent representatives on their management committees and recommended that “membership of the management committees should include Traveller parents elected by parents of children attending the preschool” (Department of Education and Science, 2003, p. 78). It also suggested a range of mechanisms for parental involvement, which should be carefully chosen and be sensitive to Traveller culture. No resources or training were provided, however,

to support parental involvement in the preschools. By 2006, the Department was recommending that “no new Traveller preschools should be established” and that Traveller children should be catered for through general preschool provision. By 2011, all Traveller preschools had closed.

Parental involvement in schooling

In seeking to explore parental involvement in relation to Traveller preschools, this research draws on literature of parental involvement and democratic participation, particularly in relation to educational disadvantage. Parental involvement is not a unitary concept and can be influenced by the experience that parents have of the education system. Lareau (2011) notes that the relationships of middle-class families with the school tend to be characterised by interconnectedness, while relationships for minority parents or working-class parents tend to be characterised by a separation between family and school life. Such considerations can serve as a reminder that parental involvement needs to be understood within the particular context in which it develops and operates.

In Ireland, education for Travellers in the past was marked by separate provision and a lack of recognition of Traveller culture. Although policy now supports inclusive and intercultural education, participation rates and outcomes for Travellers remain poor. We note that the term ‘parent’ can hide the way that parents’ engagement with education can be affected by race, class and gender. Families and parenting are changing in contemporary society, women's labour force participation has increased and family structures changed. Any effective model of parental involvement must take these issues into account. Involvement can range from token activities to delegated power. We believe that parental involvement should be a partnership process in which all parties contribute for the benefit of the children.

Rationales for parental involvement may generally be placed in one of two categories. On the one hand, parents as citizens in modern democratic society have a right to involvement in decisions that affect them or their families. On the other hand, research shows many benefits for children when parents are involved, including academic (Wilder, 2014), mental health (Wang and Sheikh-Kalil, 2013) and social benefits (Rose, Shevlin, Winter & O'Raw, 2015) to children.

Many models and practices of parental involvement exist. For example, some models (e.g., Espinosa, 1995) highlight the need to create a warm and welcoming environment to facilitate involvement and to provide support for parents and teachers. These models provide a starting point for partnership, although they do not necessarily imply it. A second group of models (e.g., Epstein, 2011; Vincent and Martin, 2005) show that parental involvement can be viewed as a continuum or as a typology of different categories of involvement.

The benefits of parental involvement in education have been well-established. For example, Jeynes (2005) demonstrated in meta-analyses, benefits of parental involvement in primary and second-level education and there is widespread agreement that parental involvement is a key element in addressing educational difficulties faced by Travellers (Department of Education and Science, 2003, 2006).

In addressing the need for parental involvement in education, it was deemed important to recognise the many challenges that Traveller parents faced. Noting that 9% of Travellers lived

in unauthorised sites², the *Traveller Education Strategy* pointed out that living without access to basic services and being under threat of eviction could have a very negative impact on a Traveller child's education (Department of Education and Science, 2006). It suggested that parents' capacity to engage with education could depend on such factors as their own educational and socio-economic background as well as, for many, "their negative experience in school, illiteracy and the widespread experience of exclusion" (2006, p. 22). It also suggested that Traveller parents could not assume that their children would be treated fairly and respectfully in schools.

The *Traveller Education Strategy* recommended that Traveller parents should be encouraged and supported to participate in representative structures. Although desirable, representation needed to be meaningful and these structures needed to be examined to see how they operated and ensured that representatives could influence policy. Previous Irish research found the role of parent representatives regarding influence on policy and decision-making to be quite limited in schools in disadvantaged areas (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002). Although proposals for parents in the *Traveller Education Strategy* were positive, therefore, one could argue that they were based on an overly benign view of the education system.

Findings on parental involvement in Traveller preschools

Irish Travellers, like other Traveller groups across the European Union, have struggled against discrimination in education (O'Hanlon, 2010). In Ireland, in recent decades, legislation and policy have evolved seeking to protect individuals in minority groups by recognising and valuing difference (Boyle et al., 2018). Recognition and protection of individuals, however, as Hébert (2013, p. 5) notes in the context of Canadian schools, may not be "sufficient to guarantee against denigration that groups may suffer." Research shows that teachers can make racial assumptions about different ethnic groups which prevents them from engaging with them as equal partners in their children's education (Page, Witting & Mclean, 2007). Bhopal (2004) argues that this is most pronounced in relation to Travellers, with children often continuing to suffer from racism, thus reinforcing the negative perceptions of schooling that Traveller parents frequently hold from their own childhood experiences. This section documents the findings in relation to Traveller parents' involvement in the Traveller preschools and is presented under three broad overlapping themes that emerged from the data: school cultural facilitative factors largely driven by school personnel evidenced in welcoming practices such as open-door policies, recognition of Traveller culture, and targeted communication practices; direct school involvement by Traveller parents evidenced in their knowledge and interest, their classroom and extra-curricular assistance, and their (limited) decision-making roles; and home-based activities supportive of their children's education and development.

Traveller preschools sought to involve parents in various ways, and parents were, to a significant extent, willing to engage. The practices used by the preschools were not necessarily

² The term 'unauthorised site' refers to Travellers who live at the roadside due to lack of access to private rented accommodation, social housing and/or Traveller specific accommodation (<http://www.paveepoint.ie/traveller-accommodation-crisis/>).

fully developed, nor were they necessarily fully integrated into the day-to-day operations of the preschools. Also, there was no overall national strategy for the preschools and each had its own individual approach.

Theme 1: Facilitative school culture

The main elements of school culture that facilitated parental involvement were the creation of a warm and welcoming environment, felt recognition of Traveller culture, and good communication practices between school and home.

Warm and welcoming environment

It is vital that preschools present as warm and welcoming places, in order to create a level of trust and a sense of parity between parents and preschool staff (Espinosa, 1995). Traveller parents in the study deemed this to be particularly important for their children, given their own mainly negative school experiences, and the fact that the preschool staff members were generally drawn from the settled community.

Parents reported that they felt welcome and included in the preschools and they were generally confident about approaching the teachers. In some cases, parents had developed relationships with the teachers over many years. They had sent their older children to the preschool, and some had even attended the same preschool themselves as children. They regarded the preschools as welcoming enclaves due to their all-Traveller nature. Entire families of Traveller children attended their local preschools. In some instances, mothers and fathers of children attending a preschool had themselves attended the same preschool as children. According to Síle: “The preschool is there for 25 years ... children have to go in and meet their own people, like, members of the Travelling community and get used to them” (parent, Cnocard).

Orla’s son was the fifth child in her family to attend the Castletown preschool. She compared her dealings with the preschool to dealings she had had with the local primary school that her older children attended:

I’d feel comfortable, you’d go to the [primary school], I don’t know, I find that I can talk to [the preschool teacher] easier than what you can do to the other teachers. [They] don’t seem to understand as much ... You’d get a straight answer [in the preschool] there’s a different vibe in it. [The teacher] can explain more. (parent, Castletown)

The familiarity of the teacher and the preschool created a sense of belonging for the Cuanmara parents. According to Nuala (teacher, Cuanmara), “It’s the school that they know and they trust me. They know their kids are safe with me because they know me.” Sally (parent, Cuanmara) felt a sense of belonging in this preschool and had built up a rapport with Nuala. Sally’s daughter was attending this preschool and her older children had also attended. Sally left school without literacy skills and she was aware of the cultural and social differences between herself and Nuala. She was accustomed to a lack of acknowledgement and respect for her

Traveller identity in the wider community. It was different in the preschool, and she also contrasted the preschool with the primary school:

There's a welcome there for you. There's no objection the minute you walk in, shake hands, a big smile on the face, 'would you like a cup of tea or coffee,' it means a lot ... [The primary school is] not as [welcoming] as the preschool. It's very comfortable here ... When I come in here I get the world of respect from that teacher. She knows I'm a Traveller, she knows my culture, like with the kids, the same thing.

Lucy felt welcome in her dealings with the staff. Having had a difficult time at school herself, she was determined that her children would not have similar difficulties, and this accounts for the particular attention she paid to staff interaction with her son. She described the morning routine and, in particular, the warmth of the teacher's greeting. She valued the way the teacher, who was a member of the settled community, greeted her and her child, especially as her own school experiences had been so different. She remarked on the greeting as something that represented not only warmth and welcome but also a desirable equity of treatment saying, "it wouldn't make a difference if [my son] was settled or Traveller" (parent, Lisnashee).

The warm and welcoming atmosphere was illustrated by the children's reactions to going to school (as reported by the parents). Frank commented that: "The kids love going in there, like, they look forward to it," while Annie remarked: "I've seen when the preschool is closed, the kids do be crying to get in the door." When the Traveller parents spoke of the preschools they spoke of a sense of belonging and of positive trusting relationships with the teachers. This resonates with Myers and Bhopal's (2009) study of a particular local school in the UK identified as a 'Gypsy school,' attended by a large number of Gypsy Roma Traveller children. Parents in that study felt ownership and attachment due to their long-standing relationship with the school and the fact that it was located within a space in which they felt comfortable. Similar factors were evident in Traveller preschools.

The all-Traveller nature of the preschools, the fact that they were often located close to the community, such as being adjacent to Traveller halting sites or on group housing schemes for Travellers, and that families had long-standing relationships with the preschools, all contributed to the sense of belonging that parents had for their preschools, which they viewed as enclaves of acceptance, respect and trust. This is similar to Chávez's (2011) account of protected enclaves, although in the particular setting of preschool education. Some parents explicitly contrasted their positive dealings with the preschools with less positive experiences of primary school. An additional factor was that many of the teachers had long years of experience within Traveller preschools. For example, the three teachers who took part in the initial teacher interviews had an average of twenty-one years each in their respective preschools. The teachers built trusting relationships with parents making it easier for the parents to leave their small children with them.

Recognition of Traveller culture and language

Parents wanted Traveller culture included in the preschool, something that they were more cautious about in relation to primary or second-level schools. They wanted their children to see their lives reflected there. They placed themselves central to this cultural inclusion, volunteering to help or suggesting other Travellers who would be able to contribute. This emphasis on Travellers managing the representation of Traveller culture indicated a level of comfort and confidence in their relationships with the preschools. Many examples of cultural inclusion in the preschools were mentioned by both parents and teachers. Individual preschools had procured books, jigsaw puzzles, posters and toys depicting aspects of Traveller life.

Cant is a communicative code that Travellers use beside English in Traveller-specific situations (Rieder, 2018). The majority of parents in the study referred to their Traveller language as Cant. It is also known as Gammon to some Travellers and linguists generally refer to it as Shelta. Although Travellers speak English, they regard Cant as a distinctive marker of Traveller culture. Cant is a source of pride for Travellers. It has been passed down through the generations and symbolises their distinctiveness and their separateness from the settled community. Speaking Cant among themselves in the presence of settled people is a source of power for Travellers and speaking it at home allows them to discuss matters privately in the presence of children (Binchy, 1994). All the Traveller parents in the study knew some Cant, although they believed that they had much less than previous generations and they expressed a fear that Cant might not survive long into the future. Some teachers in this study had taken steps to introduce the Cant language into the preschools, with the help and support of parents in one case. According to Síle:

We had the parents' meeting away back a couple of weeks ago and it did come out of it that Cant should be used more in the Traveller preschool so we will put our heads together hopefully and we will make charts with the different meanings of [Cant] words and, you know, put it up for the children and keep talking in the preschool to keep it up. It seems to be dying. So, we'll keep it up in the preschool, hopefully.

Communication between home and preschool

Parents visited the preschools for various reasons, calling in when they were dropping off or collecting children, inquiring about their children's progress and telling teachers about difficulties or illnesses. These visits provided a basis for a two-way exchange of information and ideas. Cáit felt that it was important to tell the teacher if there were family difficulties that might affect her son:

If I think that he's having a bad patch for a couple of days, I'll go down and speak to [the teacher] and I'll say 'he's a bit off colour at home, how is he down here?' If there's anything happening in my house ... a death in the family, I'll go down and explain all that to her, so she knows if he's having a hard time.

Invitations were extended to parents in many instances, to attend parties and plays, or to participate in parent-teacher meetings. Teachers communicated with parents in writing, through notes home and periodic newsletters containing information about preschool activities. They

extended the work of the preschool by sending home words of songs and rhymes. However, they were aware of the limitations of written communications where parents had poor literacy, emphasising the need to also use verbal communication. As one teacher said, “literacy would be a big issue ... so sending out letters isn’t always the best medium.” She continued:

We had taken some video footage of the kids playing, engaged in different activities ... and then we brought [parents] in for an evening, just a social evening and we showed them some of this as well ... they loved it.

Theme 2: School-based parental involvement

The second broad theme to emerge in relation to parental involvement in Traveller preschools included the various ways parents were involved directly in school activities: having knowledge, interest and awareness of school activities; assisting in classroom and extra-curricular activities; and (limited) involvement in school decision-making.

Knowledge, interest, appreciation of school activities

Many parents showed a keen awareness and spoke knowledgeably and positively about their children’s preschool experiences. They showed an appreciation of the skills and knowledge that the children acquired in the preschool.

Sally (parent, Cuanmara) stated that the preschool supported the children’s development in a number of different areas. She explained:

They are learning a lot here and I think it is a good experience for them because they’re doing their painting, they are coming back telling their stories, they’re singing songs. They know how to mix in with the other children and being polite... so I think the preschool is very good education for the kids.

Tara (parent, Avonard) explained how children develop and extend their vocabulary through activities:

Like their speech, things they do ... picture recognition ... they go for a story and then they listen to what the child is saying, learn the child how to listen. So they’ve all their different things, they just have them broken up during the day.

Lisa (parent, Seanbaile) commented on the skills acquired by her son in preschool, such as tidying up and putting equipment back in its proper place. She said that this had positively influenced his behaviour at home: “When he’d eat anything he’d put the things in the sink after him and he’d help me with the washing up and clothes and put them in the machine.”

Maisie (parent, Castletown) told how her daughter role-played the preschool activities when she came home: “My [daughter] sits by herself and talks to herself. ‘I’m the teacher, you’re the child’ with a book and copy. She’d be doing this [I’m a little] teapot thing.”

The parents' knowledge of the preschool came from preschool visits and communication with the teacher, and also from talking and listening to their children when they came home from preschool.

Helping in the classroom

Parents helped in the classroom in a number of preschools. One preschool had a system whereby parents attended on a rota basis and were familiar with the school routines and curriculum. Parents in this preschool worked with groups of children as well as with their own child. In two further preschools, parents helped to settle their children in at the beginning of the year. Although minimal, this allowed them to gain some familiarity with the operation of the preschool. One teacher noted the opportunities that this practice provided for "telling parents about what's happening in school and encourage them to do the same [at home]." Another teacher noted that "some parents have helped in the classroom when requested if extra help was required."

A number of teachers commented on the benefits for the children of having their parents in the classroom, seeing it as bridging the gap between home and preschool, resulting in a better preschool experience for the children. Some teachers referred to the parents' own negative experiences of school, and expressed a belief that their presence in the classroom could help them better to understand the value of preschool. A further benefit mentioned was that the greater involvement of parents led to a better understanding and awareness of Traveller culture on the part of the staff, which in turn helped to inform preschool practice and resulted in an overall better experience for the children.

As well as assisting at a curricular level, parents helped out in practical ways. They repaired, renovated or built equipment for the preschool, and in six of the preschools parents made materials for use in the preschool. One teacher described the help that some of the parents had provided in her preschool: "They would have come in to me and helped me to clean up, they would have hung pictures for me, put in nails ... I had one parent who painted chairs for me" (Nuala, teacher, Cuanmara). This sort of DIY support showed a good relationship with the preschool and demonstrated the value that parents placed on it.

Several preschools held school tours, and parents sometimes helped to organise these and also helped out on the day. Because of the desirability of having a high ratio of adults to children on outings, these provided a practical as well as a fun and enriching opportunity for parental involvement.

Decision-making

As noted earlier, membership of parent bodies, even Boards of Management, does not necessarily imply opportunity to influence school policy (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002). Parents' representation on the preschools' management structures and role in decision-making was limited. Although the questionnaire survey indicated that there were parent representatives on management committees in half of the preschools, most were selected by the committees themselves rather than elected by parents. Also, their contributions were relatively muted. The parents interviewed had little knowledge of management.

Parents, teachers and managers, while supportive of the inclusion of Traveller parent representatives on management committees, referred to various obstacles to achieving this. Teachers spoke of efforts to recruit parents without success and parents expressed a reluctance to be nominated, citing lack of time, lack of confidence and lack of expertise.

An exception was the preschool in Cnocard, which had an active parents' committee and where the parents elected their own representatives onto the management committee. In this school, the manager took a proactive stance and put a high value on involvement. She made efforts to draw the parents in and to facilitate their involvement. Additionally, she was careful not to impose her own views, but to offer space to the parents to articulate their views. Speaking of fundraising efforts by the committee, Síle, a parent and chairperson of the parents' committee, said: "It's our preschool ... we have got to fund it to run it ... We'll have a big fundraising day." Parents who were not involved with the parents' committee did support the preschool in other ways such as attending the fundraising events.

The situation in Cnocard evolved with careful planning and introduced parents to the notion of ownership of the preschool. It demonstrated that parents could be involved with decision-making in relation to preschool. This preschool created a space for parents to meet, to raise issues, to have those issues represented to management, and for parents to receive feedback.

Theme 3: Home-based activities supportive of their children's education and development

The parents in this study were aware of the benefits to children of supporting their learning at home, and they undertook a range of activities with them at home. These included talking to children about their day; affirming their efforts; and providing direct curricular support such as listening to their songs and rhymes. Their support was particularly evident in how much they valued their children's learning and parents themselves were supported by the preschool teachers with targeted guidance to do this. The parents believed that preschool provided a valuable start for their children in education and they wanted to support it. John spoke of the importance of preschool as the first introduction to learning: "I think it's very important. It's the first stepping stone to school. It learns them a lot ... What you learn in the first stepping stone you carry forward for life" (parent, Cnocard).

Parents talked to children about school

Parents spoke of how they talked to their children when they came home from preschool, asking about their day and listening to their stories. Edel reported, "[I] ask him what did he do and what did he eat and did he learn any songs, and he'd tell you." (parent, Avonard). Similarly, Maeve said:

I always ask him, 'what did you do today' and he does be singing a song. Yesterday he came home and he was singing Mr Sun. [He] said, 'if you sing that now, Mommy, the sun will come out.' He sings all them when he comes home (parent, Liosbeag).

Lucy reported how her son talked about his day in preschool: “[He] will always tell us. Somebody hits him now in school, or what he did ... we always sing the songs” (parent, Linsashee). Sally commented on how happy her daughter was after her day at preschool: “The way our kids come home happy, smile on their face, ‘we learned this song today’ ... She comes back every day she has something different to tell me about the preschool” (parent, Cuanmara).

Deirdre (parent and childcare worker, Liosbeag) was speaking not only from the perspective of being a childcare worker but also as a parent whose children had attended the preschool in the past. She stressed that asking the children about their day was important for monitoring their progress:

If you don’t talk to them when they come home, anything can be wrong with them and they won’t let you know about it and I’m sure talking to them you’ll find out if they have any little problems in preschool or worries or if they’re really learning or if they are falling behind.

Parents’ use of encouragement and praise

Parents praised the pictures and crafts that their children brought home and their efforts with songs and rhymes, understanding the need to be positive and supportive of their children’s learning. Sally said, “I’m proud of what [my daughter] is bringing back to me because I can say to her, ‘that’s very good, you’re doing very very well. Mommy is proud of you today.’” (parent, Seanbaile).

The Seanbaile parents also encouraged and praised their children’s efforts when they brought material home from the preschool. In relation to the children’s attitude to what they brought home, Annie (parent, Seanbaile) said: “They think the world of these little cardíns and things that they made.” Annie and the other parents told how they admired what the children brought home, and how they praised the children for their efforts and kept the materials.

Orla (parent, Castletown) said of the materials the children brought home: “I find them very interesting. They put their hearts into it. He brought home a picture. ‘My Family’ was written on it.” John (parent, Cnocard), too, was very interested in what his children brought home: “Their songs and stuff like that. There’s great craic doing their songs.”

Parents valued children’s academic work and social behaviour

Parents spoke enthusiastically and positively about material that their children brought home from preschool (folders of work, crafts, cards etc.). Many parents described how they displayed these materials in the home. Some kept the folders for years and it was clear from listening to them that they understood the significance of these materials for their children. They could see that the children had put effort into their work and they sought to support them and reassure them.

Maeve (parent, Liosbeag) kept all the material that her son had brought home: “I love keeping them. I keep all the stuff ... my husband does be at me. I have bags of them, yeah, up in the loft.” Deirdre’s (parent, Liosbeag) children had moved on from preschool but recently she had found “a little flower that my son done and he was only in the preschool.” Deirdre had held onto this flower for several years.

When their children brought home folders containing all the work that they had done over the year, these folders were treasured by parents and several spoke of keeping them for years: "I've bits and pieces for mine since they were in the preschool here, the three younger ones. The folder and that. I've all them." (Josie, Parent, Avonard).

The teacher in Seanbaile made scrapbooks of the children's work and presented them to the parents at the end of the year. Annie (parent, Seanbaile) explained that the scrapbook for her child contained 'photos of birthdays, Christmas, Halloween and of the outings' and she had kept it. Lucy's (parent, Lisnashee) son brought home his folder: "He'll have a big folder and their colouring and all the things they've made." Lucy put the contents on display at home. Children at the preschools made cards for their parents to mark festivals and special days during the year. Lucy explained that: "Every year, on Valentine's day or Mother's day... he'll always bring a card or something that he makes."

Both Tara (parent, Avonard) and Shane (parent, Avonard) spoke of the paintings that their children brought home and they said that they displayed them on the wall. Tara said of these paintings: "We can't make them out, but they can," while Shane said: "It gives them confidence." Cáit (parent, Cnocard) was particularly concerned about her children being mannerly and well-behaved, in order to counter negative views of Travellers:

When I'm raising the kids, a lot goes into being mannerly to people, "do not curse," you know, because people on the outside expect Travellers to be violent, have bad language. They are scared of them. So that's why I bring my kids up to be very good and very well-behaved.

Maisie (parent, Castletown) stated that the preschool provided an opportunity for children to mix with others. She said that "getting used to people" was a useful skill. Hannah (parent, Seanbaile) expressed this view also, and Tom (parent, Seanbaile) added, "and make friends." Grace (parent, Seanbaile) supported this and said, "They know how to work in a group and with one another." Shane (parent, Avonard) said: "They learn how to share and be civil to each other."

The many aspects of how parents demonstrated knowledge, appreciation, and encouragement of the various activities their children were involved in were clearly articulated by Traveller parents. Moreover, the value they placed on these activities was evident in the care with which they stored and kept artefacts, often over many years.

Curricular support at home

One of Epstein's (2011) six categories of parental involvement is the involvement of families in learning activities with their children in the home. In this study, Traveller parents responded readily to teachers' requests for home support.

Parents had encouragement and guidance from teachers on how to support learning at home: "We inform parents and guardians of our monthly activities and theme songs and rhymes and ask parents to encourage children in all activities." Teachers asked parents to work on particular tasks at home with their children, such as colour recognition or motor skills, and parents borrowed books and jigsaw puzzles from the preschool. One teacher said: "Mostly when

they are doing their counting and their colours, I encourage parents to continue this at home so that the children won't forget."

Nuala (teacher, Cuanmara) asked parents to reinforce colours at home: "I would say to the parents to talk about colours ... point out colours in the house, talk about what colour he's wearing and all that." She also said that when one of the children in her class had difficulty with colouring in, she addressed this with his mother's help: "I have been asking ... even been giving her ... paper, you know, that he can colour in with or scribble on to get him used to using the crayons."

Many teachers sent home the words of songs and rhymes and encouraged parents to practice them with their children. The teacher in Cnocard regularly sent the words of the songs home. Síle (parent, Cnocard) said that the teacher "sends a sheet home every month or every fortnight of what songs they are doing and the words of the songs." Síle sang these songs with her children, saying: "You need to have an interest in them." Some teachers asked parents to help when a child had a particular difficulty in the preschool, and offered guidance on this:

If I feel a child has slow language development I would encourage parents to practice rhymes and songs. Also to read stories to the child.

If a child is having difficulties with colours etc. I will explain to the parent and give them ideas how to teach the child with play.

Teachers sent home materials in all preschools that took part in the questionnaire survey. In some cases they lent books or puzzles which the children brought back. However, one teacher said that "parents dislike to borrow for fear of books damaged at home." In this case the preschool gave out books and puzzles without wanting them to be returned.

Lucy (parent, Lisnashee) was asked by her son's teacher, Triona, to work at home with him. This had given Lucy an understanding of the benefit of the preschool activities for his development. She explained: "What I've tried to start now was to do more with his hands and his actions ... Tell him a story, play with him and show him how to do things." Lucy took this task seriously, trusting that the teacher's advice would help her son in his education. Parent involvement in learning activities in the home can enhance learning and also help the child to perceive similarities between home and preschool (Epstein, 2011).

The findings on parental involvement in the home are interesting in light of research on the extra efforts parents invest in support of their children's education. Middle- and upper-class parents are said to make more use of "enrichment activities" than lower- and working-class parents (de Moll and Betz, 2014). While there was no evidence of "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2011) through activities such as playing an instrument, functioning as part of a team, or learning how to interact with other adults, the parents in this study were actively engaged in supporting their children's education, through reinforcement of work done at school as well as extension activities in the home.

Conclusion

In summary, Traveller parents were extensively involved in various ways with the Traveller preschools. They were active both in the school itself (with curricular and extra-curricular activities) and supportive of the school at home (with interest, encouragement, praise, and curricular support), although they had little involvement in management or decision-making at school level. Significantly, Traveller preschools were experienced as protected enclaves where parents felt welcome and accepted, and where they were involved on an individual and familial level. Much of this was attributed to the relational, the longstanding connections they had forged with teachers in the school, and the warmth and respect they felt were shown to them and to Traveller culture by school personnel.

It is widely acknowledged that bridging the gap between school and family can play an important role in addressing educational disadvantage. Parental involvement covers a range of attitudes and practices. It has been shown that Traveller preschools sought to involve parents in various ways, and that parents were, to a significant extent, willing to engage. Involvement practices depended to a large extent on the skills and commitment of individual teachers, on the resources available, and the value that parents placed on them. The practices documented here, however, do demonstrate that both parents and staff saw value in parental involvement in Traveller preschools. Teachers strove to create a warm and welcoming space where parents could be involved, and parents responded to the opportunities provided. They dropped into the preschools for various reasons and this gave them a good understanding of the value of preschool; they also advocated for their children and supported their learning in the home. The range and type of involvement in Traveller preschools showed that parents responded when preschools were welcoming and open.

One simple lesson that should transfer to any early years' services policy related to the enrolment of Traveller children, is the need for an inclusive intercultural approach that respects Travellers and has positive regard for their culture. Traveller parents' involvement increased when they felt their culture was recognised and appreciated. Significantly, Traveller parents were able to provide considerable curricular and extra-curricular support for their children both in the school and home settings. Much depended on their feelings of being welcome in the preschools, and the security in what they experienced as the protected enclave represented by the preschools.

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