

# Using ICT to improve access to the education system for Traveller children

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Attend school, gain an education: a civil right which many of us regard as being important to our children's well-being if they are to succeed in life as adults. By the time they are five, and often before, the expectation is that children will be attending school full-time, and although there may be many agonising decisions which take place before, during and after the leaving of the nest, and some school days missed due to illness, holidays, etc., we often anticipate that they will continue to attend school more frequently than less, for at least the following eleven years. We expect the pitfalls, but we also expect an education for our children.

For many Traveller children, this rite of passage to prepare them for adulthood is not easily accessed and can often be a fragmented, bumpy road, with many potholes and rivers to cross, in order for them to gain access to the education system, receive schooling on a continual basis and remain with their families. For example, some Occupational Travellers e.g. circus and fairground families, move at least every fortnight for seven months of every year.

## Traveller children and school

Travellers are not a homogenous group as the word Traveller is a generic term which encompasses many groups, each having their own culture, values and beliefs. Thus the term includes a diverse 'community' of people, but they all have one thing in common, which is that they are or have a history of being nomadic.

It is this lifestyle which makes access to the current education system very difficult, because it reflects the structure and needs of the population majority, which are static and not nomadic in their movement. This factor is increased by further obstacles which have evolved from it and from the attitude that society has had towards Traveller groups throughout history. The obstacles faced by many Traveller families include fears of discrimination at school by both parent and child, parents' concerns that their children will be disadvantaged educationally and emotionally by frequently changing schools, and eviction from sites resulting in fragmented attendance and education (Ofsted 1996).

Regardless of these obstructions, the need for Traveller children to be educated is reflected in both the law and by Travellers themselves. Legally,

Traveller children are required to attend school for at least 200 sessions per year. Local authorities are to provide and support this, and Traveller parents have a duty to ensure that their children are receiving suitable education when not at school.

Travellers have also expressed a need to receive education. The National Gypsy Council has called for improvements to access to mainstream schooling. They suggest that this will help to break down barriers between Traveller groups and the static communities, provide Traveller children with equality of opportunity, and enable them to gain skills to help them find employment as adults. The latter point becomes more and more important as social and economic change means increased mechanisation and the erosion of traditional work roles of many Travellers (West Midlands Education Service for Travelling Children, WMESTC 1994).

From the points raised, the need for schooling is fundamental to providing Traveller children with opportunity in adult life, but how can the current education system support this and enable Traveller families to retain their identity and lifestyle? To access the system and have continuity of schooling, some Traveller families have been 'forced' to assimilate into the static community, thus denying themselves their lifestyle and being at the threat of losing their culture and identity. But without doing this, the chances are their child's education will be very fragmented and incoherent.

So what is the solution?

## Distance learning projects

One way which local educational authorities facilitate the education of Traveller children is through paper-driven distance learning. This form of education provides continuity and gives support to parents, who, as mentioned above, have the responsibility to provide for the education of their children when they are not in school.

An example of such a scheme is offered by WMESTC. Distance work is provided for Occupational Travellers when they are away from their winter site and school. Each scheme of work is individual for each child and helps to provide continuity and links with him or her and the school. It thus enables the children to retain their lifestyle and remain with their family.

The concept of learning outside the school walls, free of physical attendance has been taken nearer to realisation through the amalgamation of ICT and distance learning. This is because through using elements of ICT such as videoconferencing and email, the transactional distance between student and teacher is reduced, since communication is increased, when compared to distance learning through the medium of postal correspondence.

Moore (1993) explains that the distance between learner and tutor is not only geographical but also psychological and communicative because of the physical separation. It is this space which he refers to as '*transactional distance*', and which can affect both the teaching and the learning. He goes on to suggest that in order for effective learning to take place, the transactional distance needs to be crossed, and this occurs through dialogue between teacher and student. By increasing the frequency of dialogue the chances are that the learner will be more motivated and stimulated and the teacher will have a better knowledge of where their student is at, and what immediate support is required.

### Three Pilot Schemes using ICT

The notion of using ICT to facilitate distance learning has recently been explored by the European Federation for the Education of the Children of Occupational Travellers (EFECOT). They have developed three pilot schemes; Topilot, Flex and Trapeze, which the WMESTC has been taking part in. The results so far are quite exciting, and if the projects prove to be successful, perhaps a more flexible pedagogy could be found in the 21st century, to support the education and lifestyle of nomadic Traveller families.

#### *Topilot*

This completed project commenced in 1996 and finished in 1999, lasting for 34 months. The aim was to develop a low-cost multimedia service for distance learning for Traveller children, including pre-school and primary.

The learner workstation was a CDI (Interactive Compact Disc) player connected to a television, together with a mobile (GSM) modem. The latter was to provide communication and overcome the difficulty of limited access to fixed telephone lines by Travelling families. The project designed interactive multimedia learning discs, which included one named 'Rollerball' for early years children aged 4 to 6 years. The exercises on this were aimed at developing reading, writing and numeracy skills.

The learners' work was sent to the tutor via the telematics network, as well as messages between the learner and the teacher and vice versa. The teacher workstation included a modem to access a database, containing children's work and any messages, via a website on the Internet.

#### *Flex*

The aim here was to develop a computer based learning environment, with one course targeting early years education. It started in September 1998 and finished in August 2000.

The learner workstation was composed of a laptop computer, a mobile (GSM) modem and a Digital Video Broadcast Receiver (Mediaspot). Communication from teacher to learner was via satellite and from learner to teacher via the mobile network. A library of multimedia teaching materials was developed, and took the form of a database with a website interface, which the teacher could access and contribute to. The purpose of the database was to enable the teacher to select appropriate material, which was broadcast via the one-way satellite link.

#### *Trapeze*

The objective is to build a satellite tele-education service. It is a one-year project working with the European Space Agency, which started in November 1999. In England the children included are of the age range seven to ten years.

The learner workstation is a personal computer, and the interface is to be kept as simple as possible to provide a user friendly and effective learning environment. A library of learning materials will be stored on a web site database, as in the FLEX project.

Two-way communication via satellite using the KU-band will enable large information files to be transmitted as well as received by the learner.

### Points to consider

There are, though, some considerations to be made relating to these projects. Firstly, the success of these projects, especially where young children are concerned, is dependant upon the involvement of parents, because they are needed to facilitate the learning which takes place on the screen with actual concrete experiences. The projects do include support and training for the parents involved, but as the projects grow and more Traveller groups are accessed, so will the training have to be increased, especially where communities with poor literacy skills are included. Hopefully the cost of this support will not deter the projects from being developed and realised for all Traveller communities, so that they are provided with a choice of how they access effective education for their children and possibly even for themselves.

Secondly, through being educated outside the school walls, the integration of the static and nomadic communities is limited and therefore opportunities for the breakdown of discrimination is reduced. Or is it? The communication links provided by ICT are ever developing, with email and video-

conferencing enabling children to communicate with each other the world over. Through projects such as Trapeze, it may be possible to develop friendships with not only fellow Traveller children but also with children from the static community which attend the base school.

The Trapeze project currently links several Traveller children together once a week through using audioconferencing to provide an opportunity for collaborative work. This could be extended to include non-Traveller children at the base school, so that the children could interact with each other, work together, and hopefully form friendships, and possibly the notion of learning together, living together could be actualised.

The advantages and disadvantages of using ICT to facilitate distance learning to support the education of Traveller children are yet to be evaluated, but the

fact that such projects have been implemented suggests that a more flexible school system may be soon be seen.

### *References*

Further details on these projects and resource materials are available from the EFECOT website: <http://www.efecot.net>

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