

# An exploration of female Travellers' experiences of guidance counselling in adult education

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## **Abstract**

*The proposed changes in the further education sector, including the rationalisation of the VEC into Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs) and the closures of the Senior Traveller Training Centres (STTCs), have implications for guidance counselling provision to the Traveller community. This article discusses female Travellers' experiences of guidance based on exploratory research in one STTC. The findings highlight low levels of participation in education and employment, as well as the types of barriers experienced by the learners. It also suggests that female Travellers have particular guidance needs that require culturally sensitive interventions to support their progression.*

## **Introduction**

The Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI) was established in 2000 by the Department of Education and Science (DES, 2000). There are currently 40 services providing guidance counselling to adults pursuing education and training courses leading to further education or employment opportunities. This includes members of the Traveller community. Despite the advancements since 2000, the need for appropriate quality assurance mechanisms to evaluate the long-term outcomes of guidance interventions in the AEGI is still an issue (Hearne, 2011). In view of the proposed closure of all STTCs in 2012, guidance on progression options is particularly relevant for adult Travellers at this present time. However, there is a dearth of research on adult Travellers' personal experiences of guidance provision within the further education sector in Ireland. This exploratory study, which examined a small group of female Travellers' experiences of an AEGI service in one STTC located in a VEC adult education centre, attempts to address some of the issues involved for Travellers and guidance practitioners.

Having worked with adult Travellers as a tutor for a number of years, the researcher was interested in female Traveller education and progression in the context of their unique culture and the Traveller economy in general. Specifically, this practitioner-based study focused on the relevance of guidance counselling for female Travellers, and the implications of the closures of STTCs' for access to appropriate guidance and support in the future. A total of 11 second year students who had experienced guidance counselling at the STTC were invited to participate in the study. Nine of them, ranging in age from 19 to 26, took part in two focus groups. There was some variance in their levels of education and qualifications, ranging from FETAC levels 2 to 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. In addition, a former Traveller student of the STTC who had received guidance and is now studying for a degree in an Institute of Technology (IoT) was interviewed.

### **Literature context: Female Travellers' experience of adult education and guidance**

This section briefly contextualises the study before discussing the findings. Given the low participation rates in second level education by Travellers, it is likely that adult education has particular importance for Travellers who have experienced gaps in their earlier education (Pavee Point, 2005). However, the failure of service providers to take sufficient account of the culture and lifestyle of Travellers is a contributory factor in relation to poor school attendance (Lodge and Lynch 2005). More recently, the lack of role models, the low levels of Travellers staying on in school and older Travellers' unhappy experiences of school, account for poor engagement in formal education by some Travellers (DOHC 2010).

Unsurprisingly, Travellers continue to encounter obstacles to accessing education and guidance provision in further and adult education. Some barriers are general to adult learners' experiences, such as the lack of flexible learning opportunities, childcare commitments, poverty and discrimination (Hearne 2005; 2010; Lynch 1999). Others relate to cultural factors such as family commitments and early marriage, gender roles and obligations towards the extended family (Hourigan and Campbell 2010; Kiernan 2010). There is also a high incidence of exclusion and low participation rates in education by Gypsy, Roma and Travelling communities in the UK and Europe, which is comparable with the experience of Irish Travellers (DOHC 2010; EUMC 2006; Maddern 2010; Phillips & Eustace 2010; Wilkin et al 2009). Therefore, it is argued that education provision, including frontline supports such as guidance, needs to attend

to issues of cultural diversity and become more accessible to ethnic minority groups (DES, 2000; NCCA, 2006; Philips & Eustace, 2010). Consideration must also be given to a socially just accommodation of diverse groups in the allocation of public funding (Parker-Jenkins et al, 2005).

There is now an imperative in guidance provision to match the personal needs and client's circumstances, as well as the importance of ensuring greater diversity in the types of services available and the ways these services are delivered (OECD, 2004b) However, the prevalence of an ethnocentric notion of counselling of a white, middle-class activity that operates with many distinctive values and assumptions is different from, and irrelevant to, many clients, including the Traveller community (Bimrose, 2006) Therefore, a multicultural competency framework for guidance counsellors specifies the importance of practitioners having an awareness of their own assumptions, values and biases, an understanding of the world view of culturally different clients and the ability to develop appropriate intervention strategies and techniques when dealing with multicultural clients (Sue et al, 1995,1996).

### **Female Travellers' experiences of education and guidance in one STTC**

The issue of low levels of participation in education at all levels by Travellers indicates that only 40% of all Traveller children of post-primary age attend mainstream secondary school (Pavee Point, 2005). This was highlighted by the Traveller women in the study with some of them citing the lack of value traditionally placed on formal education as a reason for poor school attendance and attainment amongst Travellers. One woman stated "*we never thought of education, we weren't brought up with it*". The issue of the poor history of role models within the Traveller community identified by the DOHC (2010) was also evident, with another woman observing, "*the mothers haven't an education; the fathers haven't an education. That's leaving them say oh, when I'm leaving school, that's it. Whereas if they see role models maybe getting proper jobs, at least it's something*".

The Traveller women in the study referred to their need to feel comfortable in their education surroundings in order to engage fully with the learning process. Two women had encountered difficulties caused by gaps in their earlier education which had an impact on their later learning experiences. One woman had "*found it very challenging*", whilst another who had progressed to an IoT stated "*I really feel that I had to work extremely hard because my education wasn't up to the standard of third level.*"

The provision of guidance counselling by qualified guidance practitioners in the STTC featured in this study is a relatively new phenomenon. The Traveller women had little experience of guidance counsellors either in the STTC, or in second level in relation to themselves or their children. This correlates with previous findings that marginalised and disadvantaged groups tend to be the most reluctant to use support services in a formal institutional context (OECD 2004b; Marris 2004). Although the Traveller women had engaged with the guidance service in the STTC, including group and one-to-one support, they demonstrated different degrees of understanding of the role of the Guidance Counsellor in the Centre. For some, their experience of guidance counselling ranged from *“I was very happy with the outcome”*, to *“I found it wasn’t relevant to me at all”*. However, some of their expectations of the service were somewhat unrealistic. For example, one learner thought it was part of the Guidance Counsellor’s role to act as an advocate on her behalf at her third level college *“If their kids are sick, they’re (Travellers) not going to go to college. Guidance Counsellors need to make lecturers aware of this and be there to support them”*.

The OECD (2004a) recommends that guidance counselling should address the personal, social, educational and vocational needs of learners in STTCs. This is significant in light of the Traveller women's experience of guidance sessions being pitched at ‘too high a level’ for them. In particular, they identified the value of continuity and familiarity with education and guidance personnel, and the need for the Guidance Counsellor to be familiar with Traveller culture. One learner felt that to fully engage in the guidance counselling process *“you have to trust a person, confide in them ... the people teaching here are more helpful really”*.

Sue et al’s (1996) propositions that guidance practitioners need to examine their own assumptions and biases when dealing with clients from different ethnic backgrounds is pertinent to this study. Some of the women described how the Guidance Counsellor’s perceived low expectations led to their disengagement with the guidance process. One learner stated, *“I was thinking of work experience at the time and she said “no” that she couldn’t do anything and that was no good to me, personally”*. However, as this may relate to the learners’ expectations there may be confusion amongst both parties as to the role of guidance in the STTC.

Whilst there is an emphasis on income generation rather than working for a wage in the Traveller culture (DOHC, 2010), traditional Traveller self-employment activities, such as recycling and horse trading, have become more difficult with increasing legislation around such activities. Consequently, a large pro-

portion of Irish Travellers may be unemployed and dependant on social welfare payments. The Traveller women in the study acknowledged the changes in Travellers' lifestyles and their need for practical guidance support, "*It's all about making ends meet now*"; "*Well it's changing times, isn't it. I mean, you'll see more and more going into education*". This highlights the need for the guidance practitioner to be familiar with Traveller issues including cultural and economic concerns and a multicultural interventionist approach based on the individual needs of the learner.

### **Barriers to participation in education for female Travellers**

A number of specific barriers for female Travellers, already identified in the literature, emerged in the study. The Traveller women also referred to specific gender issues in terms of traditional roles in the family and community which may impact on them engaging in education. The Traveller community is generally recognised as being a strong patriarchal society, and so the role of women is heavily orientated towards motherhood and the homemaker (Cooney 2009). The research findings support this view with one woman stating "*Traveller families are male dominated. You're not going to see the man looking after the kids*". Hourigan and Campbell (2010) identify Traveller gender roles and obligations towards the extended family as barriers to progression in education. Kiernan (2010) quotes some young Traveller women who suggest that getting married young and the value put on motherhood within the Traveller culture are factors affecting early school leaving for Traveller girls. However, Kiernan's (2010) research also finds that some Traveller women value an education and career before settling down. Similar viewpoints emerged in this study with some of the Traveller women citing early marriage within Traveller culture as a significant factor in girls' decisions to leave school early. Nonetheless, the importance of engaging in education was also referred to by one of the participants who stated "*you achieve more out of life...being out, mixing with people. Knowing you're doing something worthwhile*".

Lynch (1999) identifies the alienation and prejudice experienced by Travellers generally in education. It is claimed that Traveller women actually experience triple discrimination – discrimination as women, as Travellers, and as Traveller women (Pavee Point, 2008). One woman in the study summed up her experiences of the barriers to participation succinctly, "*with one, me being a Traveller and two bad education and three I'd no confidence and all them piled into one and I just lost confidence altogether*". Furthermore, as identified by Maddern (2010), for one of the women who had progressed to third level the effects of poor ear-

lier education experiences had resulted in a lack of trust and fear of the learning environments. She commented, “... *walking into college as a Traveller, you’re already looked at. People judge you*”.

Finally, despite varying levels of funding supports in further education, the financial barrier still impacts significantly on adults’ participation in educational activities (Hearne, 2010). In light of current Government cuts this issue is likely to become more notable. The issue of finance was a recurring theme for many of the Traveller women in the study, with one learner stating “*my children are small and if you... have to pay for a crèche then obviously you won’t be able to afford that*”. A specific cultural difference emerged in relation to parenting and finance. The women felt that the Traveller culture dictates that Traveller parents put money away for their children’s weddings, whereas settled parents were more likely to save for their children’s education. One mother stated “*it’s our job to pay for the wedding*”. Childcare and the medical card were major priorities with one participant stating “*it’s important for some Travellers like if they get employment they’d be thinking will I lose my medical card?*” Interestingly, another participant argued that the current scrutiny of social welfare payments could have a positive effect in terms of Travellers getting into work “*if the dole is took off, they have to get into some kind of job*”. This viewpoint mirrors Hourigan and Campbell’s (2010) claim that Travellers’ reliance on the social welfare system can be a significant obstacle to Traveller progression in education and employment.

### **Implications for guidance provision to Travellers’ in adult education**

This article has explored female Travellers’ experiences of education and guidance provision in one STTC. A number of observations can be made from this study, namely: the relevance of further education for female Travellers in the context of the changing nature of the Traveller economy; the necessity for guidance practitioners to be culturally aware of Travellers’ needs in adult education; and the need for greater recognition of the barriers that Travellers continue to face in their engagement with education.

The findings indicate that specific, culturally sensitive guidance counselling interventions are required when engaging with female Travellers. Even though the AEGI provides a range of guidance supports to adult learners the complexities of guidance interventions for the Traveller community has been overlooked to date. Therefore, a multicultural approach that appropriately responds to client needs is strongly advocated by the authors. This would involve the inte-

gration of society's response to difference together with relevant strategies and techniques within current theory and practice (Bimrose, 2006). Furthermore, the impact of the closure of the STTC's and the establishment of the new further education and training authority, SOLAS, has implications for the future provision of guidance counselling to the Traveller community. As there is currently an absence of research into the effectiveness of guidance interventions for adults in general, the need for further research with the Traveller Community is vital.

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