

How can integrated working be improved to aid secondary transfer rates for Traveller children?



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Practitioner-led research 2008-2009

PLR0809/023



This report is part of CWDC's Practitioner-Led Research (PLR) programme. Now in its third year, the programme gives practitioners the opportunity to explore, describe and evaluate ways in which services are currently being delivered within the children's workforce.

Working alongside mentors from Making Research Count (MRC), practitioners design and conduct their own small-scale research and then produce a report which is centred around the delivery of Integrated Working.

The reports are used to improve ways of working, recognise success and provide examples of good practice.

This year, 41 teams of practitioners completed projects in a number of areas including:

- Adoption
- Bullying
- CAF
- Child trafficking
- Disability
- Early Years
- Education Support
- Parenting
- Participation
- Social care
- Social work
- Travellers
- Youth

The reports have provided valuable insights into the children and young people's workforce, and the issues and challenges practitioners and service users face when working in an integrated environment. This will help to further inform workforce development throughout England.

This practitioner-led research project builds on the views and experiences of the individual projects and should not be considered the opinions and policies of CWDC.

PLR0809/023

## **How can integrated working be improved to aid secondary transfer rates for Traveller children?**

**Kate D'Arcy**  
**Cambridgeshire Race Equality and Diversity**

## Abstract

This research question arose through the lead practitioner's professional practice, which is focused upon the transfer and retention of Traveller children from primary to secondary school. The research project involved two contrasting areas of Cambridgeshire; rural south Cambridgeshire and urban Cambridge City. These areas have the lowest numbers of Traveller children transferring and staying on at secondary school in the county.

The aim of this research project was to explore how integrated working could improve secondary transition rates for Traveller children in two specific areas of Cambridgeshire. The project invited a variety of professionals who were involved in transition work in Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire to become involved in the project. Three of these professionals were then engaged to carry out the research and came together only at group meetings.

The professionals worked separately on their own chosen research areas for their contribution to the research. There were 12 professionals and 36 children and young people involved in the research; these included

- four teaching assistants
- one transition co-ordinator
- two teachers
- four transition social workers
- one transition worker
- 36 pupils.

A literature review was completed, which along with data from the first interviews, provided the thematic analysis and contextualization of themes. The research also used ethnographic case studies to observe the characteristics, developments and findings of the different groups involved.

Data was initially analysed per professional, and then compared for overall similarities and recommendations.

There were then final interviews with professionals. Findings include:

- Work with Traveller parents was paramount to changing the current trend of low transition and retention.
- Work needs to pay particular attention to the transition of female Traveller students and the retention of male Traveller students.
- Home–school relationships and community cohesion strategies need to be strengthened and secondary schools need to adopt a proactive approach towards this.
- A professionally integrated, co-ordinated approach that recognizes the need for extra input for Travellers' transition and retention is essential.

The research project therefore enabled a more informed approach to professionals' transition work. They had a clearer understanding of the issues involved and ideas about how these might be tackled. Integrated working was found to be very informative and supportive in this process and further meetings have been planned.

**Kate D'Arcy**  
**Cambridgeshire Race Equality and Diversity**

## 1. Introduction

This research arose from the practitioner's professional practice, which is focused upon the transfer and retention of Traveller children from primary to secondary school. The research project involved two contrasting areas of Cambridgeshire; rural south Cambridgeshire and urban Cambridge City. These areas have the lowest numbers of Traveller children transferring and staying on at secondary school in the county.

In South Cambridgeshire there are two distinct groups of Traveller communities involved: the Irish Travellers live on a large site, with ongoing planning issues and therefore do not have a very stable environment for educational progression. The other Travellers involved were English Gypsy/Travellers who live in smaller, more settled but rurally dispersed locations.

The Travellers in Cambridge City were all Gypsy/Travellers and live on one of the biggest sites in England, which is divided up into many smaller plots.

The project researcher is employed by the Traveller Education Service (TES) and has during the past three years developed an effective transition programme for young Travellers in Cambridge City. This has led to an increase in secondary transfer; however the work has been largely dependent on TES staff rather than school staff. She therefore identified a real need for improved integrated working to raise professionals' awareness of the complexities of Travellers' transition issues in order to empower schools and children's services to deliver such work themselves. It is hoped that this process will ensure long-term ownership and sustainability of the work.

The research comprised:

- a literature review focused upon primary and secondary transitions
- the researcher's ethnographic observations and interviews with different groups of professionals including teachers, teaching assistants, a transition social worker, a transition worker from a voluntary organization, and Traveller children and their parents.

## 2. Aims and objectives of the project

The main aim of this research project was to explore how integrated working could improve secondary transition rates for Traveller children in two specific areas of Cambridgeshire. The objectives included:

- raising professionals' awareness of the issues involved
- enabling funded 'time-out' from the classroom for teachers and teaching assistants (TAs)
- facilitating integrated working by co-ordinating and supporting meetings and group tasks

- enabling professionals in schools to direct and deliver this work to ensure ownership, sustainability and development of the transition work
- enabling professionals' reflection upon the issues of transition and retention, their research process and findings in order to improve their practice and integrated working for the future.

Table 1 outlines the time-scales of the research project.

**Table 1 Research project time-scale**

Date	Event
September–October	Literature review
October	Whole group set-up meeting
October–January	Groups complete research work
November–December	Interviews with professionals (1)
January	Whole group feedback meeting
January–February	Interviews with professionals (2)
February–March	Final whole group meeting and dissemination

### 3. Research context

One of the main educational concerns relating to Traveller children is their disproportionately low achievement. The fact that low numbers of Traveller children transfer and stay on at secondary school is a very significant part of this problem. Evidence of academic underachievement can be seen in national attainment data (DfES): In 2005 9.1 per cent of Gypsy Roma pupils achieved 5+ A\*-C GCSE grades compared to 42.9 per cent White British, 56.6 per cent White and Asian and 68.8 per cent Chinese students (DfES 2006: 58).

Table 2 shows the Cambridgeshire TES 2007 figures for children and their transitional pathways by district across the county. The top district and figures are in bold because they are the lowest and the focus of the research.

**Table 2 Transitional pathways of Traveller children in Cambridgeshire**

District/number of pupils	a. Number of pupils eligible for transfer at end of Key Stage 2	b. Number of pupils transferring*	Number of pupils electing for home education	Without a school place and not registered for home education
<b>South Cambs/City</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>34</b>
Fenland	19	15	4	0

Huntingdon	9	8	0	1
East Cambs	10	8	2	0
Cambs Total	88	47	6	35

\* Presented as number who accrued one day attendance at Key Stage 3

Professionals involved in the research project divided themselves into three geographical groups and Table 3 shows the different professionals in their geographical groups as well as a short synopsis of their backgrounds and research targets. The project researcher was involved with the work of all groups. The names of the groups are fictional to preserve participants' anonymity.

**Table 3 Professionals' groups and their geographical locations**

Group name and geographical area	Professionals	Traveller parents	Traveller children
<b>Woode</b> South Cambridgeshire	2 TAs Transition co-ordinator	None actively involved	21 pupils: 13 males and 8 females aged 10 to 11 years old
<b>Siris</b> Cambridge City	2 TAs 2 teachers with responsibility for Year 7 and 1 inclusion teacher Transition social worker Transition worker	None actively involved	12 pupils: 5 males and 7 females aged 10 to 11 years old
<b>Cedar</b> Cambridge City	Teacher x 1 (head of year 7) Transition social worker	3 Traveller mothers	3 students 2 males and 1 female aged 12, 13 and 14 years
TOTAL	12	3	36

## Cedar

Cedar represented professionals from a secondary school in Cambridge City. They have recently experienced increasing numbers of Traveller pupils transferring to their school; however retention is a real issue for them. They decided they would interview Traveller students and their parents (separately). They hoped these interviews would reveal how transition is experienced by representatives from their local Traveller community and that this would inform the school about possible solutions for improving Travellers' retention.

## Siris

Siris comprised a primary school in Cambridge City with large numbers of Traveller pupils on roll and their secondary feeder school; last year only one Traveller pupil transferred out of nine. This group decided to organize three monthly trips from the primary to the secondary school to aid familiarity for pupils and their parents. This was particularly important as the secondary school had been in special measures and subsequently held a negative reputation with the local Traveller community. Short questionnaires were given to all children in order to get their feedback on these visits (Appendix 1).



## **Woode**

Woode included one secondary school in South Cambridgeshire and both its primary feeder schools. Both primary schools have large numbers of Traveller pupils; they also have minimal numbers of pupils transferring. This group decided to organize a series of joint visits, with pupils from both schools visiting the secondary school. They hoped that this would allow the pupils to get to know each other and aid familiarity with the school setting. Both primary schools also took photographs at the secondary school and subsequently planned to create displays at the primary schools. The aim of this was to inform and familiarize parents about secondary school as a first step, before visiting, as many felt very daunted by the secondary setting.

## **4. Literature review**

The literature review focused upon the transition from primary to secondary school. There is a good range of local and national documentation regarding transition policy and practice and a selection of these provided the basis for this literature review. Research with particular reference to the transition for Traveller children was very limited and therefore only one specific research project was reviewed (Derrington and Kendall 2004). Their research observed 44 Gypsy Traveller children as they transferred and progressed through secondary school. Their sample was across 15 local authorities in England, which included Cambridgeshire. For the purpose of this research report the literature review has been divided into themes: pupil skills, professional skills and the transition and retention of Traveller children. The key points and recommendations within these themes are summarized below.

### **4.1 Pupil skills.**

The literature review ascertained that children who develop superior strategies to deal with change, have confidence, a clear sense of identity and positive peer friendships are better equipped to deal with their transition than children who do not have these attributes and skills.

It was also apparent that children who experience multiple changes or deal with constant change in their home and/or school lives are more vulnerable, as are children who experience 'cultural dissonance' such as Traveller children. Cultural dissonance has been defined as 'a sense of discord or disharmony, experienced by individuals where cultural differences are unexpected, unexplained and therefore difficult to negotiate' (Derrington and Kendal 2008: 125). Building resilience is therefore a key enabling strategy and has been acknowledged in the context of the Every Child Matters agenda (see note 1) as a key protective and preventative factor.

Reference was also made to the fact that many transfer projects focus solely upon emotional changes and do not address educational progression. Research has identified that transition to secondary school involves social and emotional aspects but also affects

learning and DCSF (2008) research states: ‘transfer to secondary school can result in a dip in motivation and a slowing down of progress with up to 40% of pupils failing to make expected progress during the year immediately following a change of school’ (para. 3(1)).

## 4.2 Professional skills and focus

This literature review found that integrated working, whereby professionals engage in critical debate regarding transition and regularly review their approaches, was essential.

It was also noted that direction and leadership from the ‘top’ (head teachers and local authorities) have been observed as vital: ‘the stronger the partnership between stakeholders, the greater the potential for progress’ (DCSF 2008 under ‘Reports’).

<sup>1</sup> *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* is a new co-ordinated government approach to the wellbeing of children and young people from birth to age 19 which was legally underpinned by the Children Act 2004 (DCSF 2008 under ‘Websites’).

## 4.3 Transition, retention and Travellers

The most significant issue for Travellers is that schools often place too much emphasis upon cultural explanations and mobility to explain transition and retention problems. Half in Derrington and Kendal’s (2004) sample had dropped out by 14 years of age and less than a third completed their secondary education. Their research also found that most *did not travel* and the main reasons for dropping out were:

- bullying and racism
- cultural dissonance
- low expectation and lack of official support (apart from that provided by TES).

The research therefore clearly identified that Traveller children experience **additional barriers** above and beyond the impact of changing schools.

The literature review therefore identified several key factors to facilitate effective transition and retention and these were shared with professionals as part of their induction to the research process:

- an emphasis on leadership from the top to drive partnership work and strategies for improving children’s resilience
- the need for greater school awareness of the additional difficulties Traveller children face during transition and at secondary school
- the need for schools to address these difficulties and not use cultural explanations and mobility as reasons not to tackle them
- transition projects need to concentrate on emotional, social and academic factors.

In addition it was acknowledged that:

- there is a gap in research regarding transition and retention for Traveller children

- increased focus upon transition by the Department for Children Families and Schools (*Strengthening transfers and transitions, partnership for progress, 2008*), including the National Strategies Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Achievement Programme (GRTAP) has certainly aided participation within schools.

## 5. Methodology

The project was viewed as a starting point; to raise professionals' awareness of Travellers' transition and retention needs and to enable integrated working to address these needs. The research used ethnographic case studies as the researcher worked alongside all professionals to observe the characteristics, developments and findings of the different groups involved. This follows Cohen and Manion's concept of case studies where the purpose of such observation is to 'probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena' (Cohen and Manion 2007: 258).

Qualitative methods enabled the research question to address different objectives. These can broadly be described as contextual, diagnostic, evaluative and strategic (Ritchie and Spenser in Bryman and Burgess 2000: 174) (Appendix 2). Research methods included observations and interviews and this process enabled clear, analytical descriptions of the different groups, how they approached the research question and their findings and learning from this work. The research comprised the following three stages.

### 1. Initial, diagnostic stage

- A literature review.
- Dissemination of TES figures, an overview of the project researcher's transfer work project in Cambridge city and findings and also the summary of the literature as part of this project at the set-up meeting to prompt preliminary discussions and possible targets to address.
- Initial interviews with all stakeholders to identify, evaluate and formulate the issues around secondary transfer as they are perceived by professionals involved with secondary transition for Traveller children.

### 2. Action-based stage

- Eight week period for practitioners to complete their research targets.

### 3. Analytical, evaluative and reflective stage

- Short review interviews, where practitioners were asked about their experiences and learning from their practice.
- Professionals came back together to share and reflect on experiences.
- Final meeting to discuss how best to disseminate findings and set further actions for the future.

## 5.1 Data collection

Data were gathered via whole group meetings, group meetings and short individual interviews. The latter involved all professionals and occurred at the beginning and end of

the research project to ascertain practitioners' learning and development from their research. The interviews were structured and questions asked were chiefly: how did practitioners perceive the issues of transition and retention and what might be done about it? (see Appendix 3).

In order to ascertain young Travellers and their families' experience of transfer and retention, three Traveller children and their parents were interviewed; this was the focus of Cedar's research. Interview questions were structured to explore their transition experience, current feelings towards school and plans for the future. Student interviews were held at school with parental permission. Parental interviews were facilitated by the researcher and took place in the home (Appendix 4).

Triangulation, or multiple methods of data collection allowed for a fuller description and understanding of each case study.

## **5.2 Analysis methodology**

Documentary analysis was used for the literature review. Interviews were analysed by content analysis. Data from these interviews along with the researcher's observations allowed for further thematic analysis and contextualization of themes. Data were initially analysed per group, and then compared for overall similarities and recommendations.

## **5.3 Ethical considerations**

The research involved practitioners as well as members of the Traveller community. Both practitioners and Travellers were adequately prepared and informed about the research purpose and methods, including possible benefits and consequences to themselves as partners (see note 2).

In order to gain informed consent for all participants a letter was drafted using British Sociological Association (2002) guidelines: 'what the research is about, who is undertaking it, why it is being undertaken and how it is to be published and presented'.

Participation was voluntary; all interview schedules were structured in order to ensure authenticity and verification of data. In order to secure anonymity, privacy and confidentiality, no names of schools, settings, parents, young people or practitioners were used.

## **5.4 Data protection**

In order to comply with the principles of data protection, participants were made aware that any information gathered must be adequate, relevant and not excessive for those purposes. Personal information concerning research participants was kept confidential and only material considered to be proper and appropriate was recorded and shared.

2 A research application was completed and permission was obtained from Cambridgeshire County Council through their Research Governance Framework. Research findings will also be shared with them.

## 6. Case study findings

Findings are presented in case studies to contextualize the different groups' experiences and learning from this research project.

### Cedar

Cedar professionals had a good working relationship. Their perspectives of the issues regarding transfer and retention were centred upon the stigma of being a Traveller and parental attitudes. They felt that current transfer support was adequate. Interview findings are summarized below.

- **Transfer experience** – Traveller pupils spoke of common transition worries: 'moving around the school' (Victoria), 'finding classes' (Levi) and 'not having any friends' (John). Levi's mother had been concerned about adequate academic support for him.

Two parents mentioned the benefit of additional transition support that had been provided by the TES and the transition social worker.

All parents and students in this group felt it was more difficult for female Traveller students to transfer than male: 'it's because they usually stay home and clean, like my sister', John explained, 'but then she regretted it. She always tells me to keep coming to school'. Victoria's mother added that transfer had indeed been easier for her son.

- **Transition improvements** – Levi's mother suggested that for current Traveller parents with children in Year 6 'it would be good to have a meeting in primary school with staff from both schools'. Other parents agreed, however Victoria's mum stated: 'meetings should be for everyone, people should not make special arrangements for Travellers'. Community cohesion is therefore an important additional consideration for any transition work. John's mother suggested that her older daughter come to speak to current Year 6 pupils as 'more Travellers might continue if the older ones explained to them how hard it is to get work when you have not been to school'.
- **The future** – all students had different aspirations: 'I want to be a mechanic or work in a zoo' (Levi), John wanted to be a plumber or electrician and Victoria wanted to be 'a make-up artist on TV'. They also discussed the need to continue with their education in order to fulfil these careers.

Cedar professionals reflected upon these interviews as a very valuable process as they aided a deeper understanding of Travellers' educational experiences. 'Our research found

two distinct transition issues; the issue for girls to actually make the transition and for the boys, once they have transferred, keeping them there” (Head of Year 7). Interviews also confirmed the importance of the parental role in continuing in education, it was apparent that all these parents actively promoted education and saw continuing at school as important for their children’s futures.

On reflection, professionals were surprised to learn that transfer was more difficult for females than males; they had initially thought the opposite was true. They were pleased that children and parents did not feel they were treated differently because they were Travellers. Cedar thought that a similar interview process, held on a regular basis, could improve retention. This was because the interviews provided a good opportunity to discuss students and parents’ educational experiences and aspirations, which improved home–school relationships. Discussion also triggered several support mechanisms to improve academic and social issues that students had raised.

## Siris

Members of Siris had never previously met. This research project therefore provided a valuable integrated working opportunity. They felt the main issues regarding transfer were caused by the different cultural expectations between schools and Traveller families. The primary teacher spoke of Traveller parents’ concern regarding their children’s safety and exposure to sex/drugs and racism at secondary school. Many spoke of the importance of involving parents:

‘The main focus needs to be on parents, getting them to go into school and not be afraid, there is also a need for someone at secondary school who can befriend them and be a “face” who they can come in and talk to if they are concerned.’

Siris arranged three school visits. The first visit took place in December 2008 and the pupils made calendars in an art lesson. The second trip occurred in February 2009 and involved a cooking activity. The final trip was scheduled for March 2009 and would involve both parents and pupils in a trampoline session. Feedback from questionnaires completed by males was more positive than females, confirming that transition is harder for girls. Girls’ feedback suggested that visits aided familiarity but did not necessarily change their decision to continue with their education. ‘I like it here but do not want to come’. Again parental expectations featured strongly in this decision: ‘My mum and dad do not want me to go. My mum wants me to help her clean up and my dad will be upset if I go’. It was also very apparent that a female pupil would not transfer ‘alone’; they relied heavily on their female Traveller peers. This situation is highlighted in the recent *The Good Childhood Inquiry* report:

‘Young people from ethnic minorities are twice as likely to have a circle of friends exclusively from their community as older ethnic minority people. It appears that as the population is becoming more diverse, it is also becoming more segregated.’  
(Pople 2009: 11)

This confirms the importance for a school community cohesion strategy as a more mixed friendship group may support young female Travellers better in their transition.

Although a final visit still needed to take place, practitioners felt that their research had raised their awareness of the need for a co-ordinated transfer strategy between primary and secondary schools and a proactive approach from the secondary school. Whole group and pupil feedback confirmed the need to involve parents from an early stage and improve community cohesion to minimize the step up to secondary school.

## Woode

Woode professionals had an additional challenge in organizing their visits to their feeder secondary school. This was because the secondary school had historically not been interested in welcoming Traveller students and had certainly never taken a proactive approach to engage them.

Due to the lack of secondary input, their first visit was informal and simply involved a brief look around the school. As part of their research project, Woode arranged additional local integrated meetings. The secondary school was not present at the first meeting, however it did attend the second meeting. This was real progress and resulted in a much-improved second visit; a formal tour was led by the transition co-ordinator and all teachers were briefed to allow visiting pupils to look in at lessons. They were also given maps of the school and prospectuses to take home. This situation highlighted the importance of integrated working for effective transition work. One TA remarked, 'the children have learnt a lot from visiting the secondary school'. She thought they now felt more confident about transferring. She had also asked the secondary school to come and visit their primary school to answer further questions from pupils. During the second trip, photographs were taken in order to produce displays for Traveller parents. On reflection, professionals spoke about how their awareness of the difficulties regarding Travellers' transfer had been raised and that integrated working had moved their work on: 'Integrated working has been very useful, it is good because you can share experiences and it is nice to know you are not on your own.'

## 7. Implications for practice

Final interviews with professionals revealed learning and development for all and comprises:

- work with **Traveller parents** was paramount to changing the current trend of low transition and retention
- work needs to pay particular attention to the **transition of female Traveller students** and the **retention of male Traveller students**
- **home–school relationships and community cohesion strategies** need to be strengthened and secondary schools need to adopt a proactive approach towards this
- a **professionally integrated, co-ordinated** approach that recognizes the need for extra input for Travellers' transition and retention is essential.

The research project therefore enabled a more informed approach to professionals' transition work. They had a clearer understanding of the issues involved and ideas about how these might be tackled. Integrated working was found to be very informative and supportive in this process and further meetings have been planned.

## **7.2 Dissemination**

The whole group was asked how they wanted to disseminate their work. It was felt that a report would not be as effective as speaking to other professionals. The group therefore planned opportunities to do so for the future and produced leaflets to alert others to this opportunity.

## **8. Conclusion**

This research project suggests that integrated working can indeed aid secondary transfer for Traveller children because integrated working facilitates a supportive environment in which professionals can share ideas and find solutions together. Obtaining Travellers' perspectives within this process is highly beneficial as it aids understanding, home-school relationships and can trigger support for pupils in school to improve transition and retention. Integrated working involving both professionals and Travellers is an empowering and sustainable process. It enables settings to support and address their Traveller children's needs rather than rely on external services such as the TES.

From a project researcher's point of view this research has been of great value. Being able to offer funding to school staff has been valuable as it allows very busy professionals 'time-out' to meet others and really focus upon Travellers' transition. Both observing and participation in the research project has been extremely interesting as it has given voice to all participants' views on transfer and transition, including Travellers' own perspectives. It seems that this process has improved professionals' commitment to tackling transition themselves; which was a central aim of this work. Co-ordination has at times been challenging, particularly at the beginning when some practitioners were a little apprehensive about the project.

The fact that this project has initiated a process of integrated working, which looks likely to continue, can be regarded very much as a success and can only benefit Travellers' educational opportunities. Due to the ongoing nature of this research project it would be interesting to revisit the project a year from now to observe further developments.



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