

The school education of children of occupational travellers in the European Union



1.0 Executive Summary

Introduction

Occupational travellers are a wonderfully diverse number of different groups that defies easy categorisation. The diversity of their occupations means that they may have little in common other than the fact that their work requires them to travel. Many travel through tradition – they have known no other life – and others travel in search of a better life. However, this travelling lifestyle may prevent the children of occupational travellers from attending school with the regularity required by the normal school year. Each of these communities has its own culture, and particular mobility pattern, but they all share problems related to access, support and continuity.

The children of occupational travellers demonstrate in a microcosm the challenges facing national education and training systems, if these systems are to meet the goals set out in the Lisbon strategy. Although data relating to the educational performance of the children of occupational travellers is not collected systematically, anecdotal evidence from this study suggests that they perform poorly against some of the Lisbon core indicators, notably early school leaving and completion of upper secondary education.

In response to these problems, this study has aimed to:

“contribute to the overall objective of making European education systems a world quality reference by 2010 by providing policy-relevant advice and information in the specific field of provision of school education for children of occupational travellers and to contribute to enhancing the social inclusiveness of the European education systems.”

The study provides an overview of the current situation regarding educational arrangements in 27 EU Member States for the children of occupational travellers, examines best practices and gives recommendations for action at EU and national level.

Methodology

The study has used a range of methodological techniques in order to fulfil the objectives of the project. These have included:

- Basic data information gathering, focusing on identifying the size, nature and dispersal of occupational traveller groups and analysing the educational systems across Europe.
- Interviews of key stakeholders to discuss barriers to the education of the children of occupational travellers, progress achieved and solutions tested.
- Case studies allowing exploration in more depth of examples of good practice.

- Analysis and reflection in order to draw conclusions and recommendations.

Occupational travellers are diverse, scattered and relatively few in number in comparison to the sedentary population. As a result, the study faced real challenges in identifying reliable data about occupational travellers in some Member States. In some Member States, the real difficulty was to know whether this reflected the absence of particular groups of occupational travellers or merely a lack of information about such groups. The approach was therefore to gather data from a range of sources, including previous research, official sources, key stakeholders, other parties and, where necessary, from anecdotal evidence. The figures presented therefore represent a good indication of the numbers of different groups of occupational travellers in Member States, rather than a precise figure.

Occupational Traveller Groups

Occupational travellers include bargees, circus workers, fairground workers and showmen/women, seasonal workers, temporary migrants, itinerant Gypsies/Roma/Sinti/Travellers and Saami. They are defined not by their ethnicity but by the fact that their occupations require an itinerant lifestyle. They are not necessarily Gypsy/Roma, although many Gypsy/Roma do still travel and work whilst travelling. Most definitions of occupational travellers exclude "New/New Age Travellers" and others for whom travelling is a lifestyle choice, rather than an essential means by which to pursue their chosen occupation. There is also an increasingly blurred distinction between occupational travellers, temporary migrants and seasonal workers, given the increasing mobility of labour.

The study has therefore used a relatively 'loose' definition of occupational travellers, in order to give a broad picture of the situation. The key groups identified are:

- bargees; in general, bargee families are mobile throughout the year, with only short stops to load and unload cargo; they are particularly prominent in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands; large numbers of bargees live in their vessels with their families; many benefit from supported distance learning 'on board' between the ages of four and six years, followed by entry into the mainstream education system, often through boarding schools.
- circus workers; in general, the circus touring season lasts up to ten months; many circuses have a permanent base for the winter and during this time children attend their local school full-time; access to education while travelling is difficult both due to the short periods spent in each stopping place and also due to work commitments (e.g. training in the circus act, helping with the set-up and packing up of the circus tent) and the environment the children live in (noise from the performance restricts the amount of

sleep they have, which may make concentration on school work difficult); attendance at local schools while travelling is therefore particularly difficult. Preferred support measures include distance-learning, mobile teaching units or boarding schools.

- showpeople; the fairground season mostly runs from the spring to the autumn, although the Christmas period can also be popular; in the winter, showpeople tend to return to their yards and their children are thus able to attend their home school; fairs may stop in each place for longer periods than do circuses, enabling more of a 'settling in' period for those children who attend local (supporting) schools; there is increasing recognition of the need to access education and gain qualifications, in part to deal with the growth in regulations with associated paperwork and in part to ensure that the children have the option to choose alternative employment in the long-term.
- seasonal workers; seasonal work tends to be low-skilled, low-paid and often informal if not illegal, particularly where the workforce includes many illegal immigrants; the seasonal workforce includes many migrant workers and Gypsies/Roma; many seasonal workers are accompanied by their children who may in fact work alongside their parents; others leave their children at home; in either case, there is a risk of disruption to school education; there is little, if any customised provision, although measures have been introduced in Spain which enable children to stay at their normal place of residence in order to attend the same school during the whole school year.
- temporary migrant workers, primarily workers from the new Member States who migrate to old Member States; many leave their children behind when they travel, either with relatives, in foster care or even unsupervised, with potentially adverse effects on their education; children who accompany their parents to another country can find that their education is significantly affected by lack of access to educational provision in their mother tongue.
- itinerant Gypsies/Roma; although many Gypsies/Roma now lead a sedentary lifestyle (in some cases as a result of policies favouring forced settlement), many do still travel particularly in France, Italy, Spain and Portugal; restrictions on the length of stays make it very difficult for children to attend school on a regular basis; many Gypsy/Roma children from casual labourer families are placed in classes with spare places or even in special schools, rather than the class most appropriate to their needs.
- Saami are the indigenous people of Sápmi, which encompasses parts of northern Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia; traditionally, the Saami led a nomadic lifestyle linked to the migration of reindeer; however, only a small proportion of Saami children continues to follow a nomadic lifestyle; those that do, make use of boarding schools or dedicated Saami schools; their children typically progress to a mainstream school at secondary level.

Barriers to accessing school education

The fundamental issue facing the children of occupational travellers is that educational systems are primarily designed to serve the sedentary population, not those who travel. This might be seen as inevitable, perhaps even desirable, since the overwhelming majority of the European population is indeed sedentary. However, this report has shown that occupational travellers face barriers to education such as:

- Visibility and recognition - educational policymakers and providers may simply be unaware of the presence of occupational travellers and/or their responsibility to provide for them;
- Perceptions and prejudice - on the part of some authorities, some members of the sedentary population and even some travellers; the needs and attributes of occupational travellers are not necessarily understood or appreciated; for example, the children possess significant skills learned in the family trade that are not recognised at school; their different lifestyles lead to them being singled out for unfavourable treatment; and finally, occupational travellers may be confused with Gypsies/Roma and thus subject to the (well-documented) discrimination that Gypsies/Roma face;
- Interrupted learning - which disrupts enrolment, learning and assessment, as well as creating language barriers where borders are crossed;
- Incompatibility with lifestyles – not only the regular moves from place-to-place, but also the assumption that children will be available for a normal school day and have access to the time, space and quietness for homework.
- Social issues – including isolation from other children, difficulties forming relationships with teachers and parental absence.

Although these barriers have been categorised under broad headings, it is clear that they are interrelated and overlap. Not all occupational traveller sub-groups face the same range of problems and barriers; each sub-group and each family will face its own unique set of issues in relation to their occupation, lifestyle and circumstances.

Regardless of these potential problems, many occupational travellers succeed in accessing appropriate school education for their children. The itinerant nature of their occupation does not necessarily mean that they value education any less than would the sedentary population. Many make extensive efforts to ensure that their children receive a good education, for example paying the costs of boarding schools or for dedicated provision such as teachers linked to circuses or shows.

Provision

Providers have developed a huge range of innovative and effective tools and approaches in response to the many challenges relating to the school education of these children.

Indeed, there is a wealth of experience in applying such tools and approaches. Innovative solutions have included distance learning, flexible learning, e-learning, boarding schools, dedicated schools (such as 'berth schools'), mobile teaching units, visiting teachers and sector academies.

Support services have also proved important. Good practice examples include support for static schools, support for parental involvement, specialised learning tools, recognition of learning (for example through 'learning passports'), culturally-sensitive learning materials, support tools for teachers, ancillary services and mediation services.

Local action has therefore been particularly vital and good practice has mostly emerged "bottom up" – often with the support of EU funding. Above all, a sound understanding of the diverse needs of the different types of occupational traveller is essential for the design and delivery of appropriate educational provision for their children. Yet there is great variation in the level of awareness and appreciation of the needs of occupational travellers – reflected in the lack of systematic data collection.

Member State policies

School education remains a competence of Member States and school education systems operate nationally in most Member States, except those where responsibility is mostly devolved to the region. It is therefore at the national level where policy has potentially the most impact on the educational situation of the children of occupational travellers – and it is the national level that must be positively influenced if proper provision is to be offered and good practice adopted and mainstreamed.

National legislation and policy relating to equality has been used in some Member States to recognise occupational travellers and protect their rights. But different conceptual approaches to equality can potentially hinder recognition, i.e. where a commitment to equality rules out customisation of education or collection of data.

The performance of Member States in recognising and providing for the educational needs of the children of occupational travellers has been very varied – in part reflecting the size, nature, diversity and visibility of occupational travellers in each Member State as well as the differences in their level of need. Put simply, in some countries certain occupational traveller groups are sufficiently concentrated and organised that national policy cannot afford to ignore them. However, in other countries, occupational travellers are too few and too scattered to be very visible to policymakers at the national level.

Some Member States have explicitly recognised the particular needs of occupational travellers, provided an overall policy framework, and developed dedicated bodies or

networks to support their education, liaise with representatives of occupational travellers and develop tools for teaching and learning. But some Member States have offered very little recognition of some occupational traveller groups in national policy and made limited efforts to customise the provision of school education for their children.

European dimension

There is a particular European dimension to the school education of the children of occupational travellers, since many occupational travellers cross borders as an essential part of their work. When accompanied by their children, such workers face enormous challenges in accessing school education that is suitable to the needs of their children.

European policy has, in fact, long recognised the educational needs of those who have an itinerant lifestyle. Indeed, the EU has made significant efforts to highlight the issue, support research into needs, finance innovative and pilot activities, identify and disseminate best practice and co-ordinate the policies of Member States. Relevant policy measures have included those relating to the free movement of labour, for example the Council Directive of 1977 relating to the education of the children of migrant workers. Other policy measures have focussed on upholding the rights of minorities, such as Roma, Travellers and people with no fixed abode. Recognition has come in different ways from the European Council, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the Fundamental Rights Agency.

A significant contribution of the EU has been the financing of an enormous number of pilot actions relating to the school education of the children of occupational travellers. Many of these have directly targeted occupational travellers or Gypsy/Roma through the Comenius Action. Others have supported innovations, such as e-learning or distance learning that can then be applied to the school education of the children of occupational travellers. The challenge is for these innovations to be disseminated widely and "mainstreamed" into national educational systems.

A considerable amount of activity to link stakeholders and exchange best practice in provision has already been undertaken, primarily through the European Federation for the Education of the Children of Occupational Travellers (EFECOT). However, this activity has, regrettably, been much reduced since the demise of EFECOT in 2003. A looser network of stakeholders, the European Network for Traveller Education (ENTE), continues to link providers, disseminate information and lobby policymakers, but lacks the financial resources to continue the full range of EFECOT's activities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Given the dispersal of occupational travellers and the very complicated issues surrounding their school education, there are no simple solutions; each occupational traveller community, family and child faces a unique set of circumstances and needs. The emphasis therefore has to be on customisation and experimentation, as well as flexibility in provision. A move towards individual, tailored learning pathways, with a focus on 'learning outcomes' rather than attendance at school, seems to present the most suitable approach towards developing provision for occupational traveller children. This represents a certain shift in attitudes, from the idea of equality of opportunities to equality of outcomes and reflects similar developments across education and training policy in Europe.

School education for occupational travellers has been most effective where innovative local provision has been supported by a wider national policy framework. Such policy frameworks should recognise occupational travellers as a distinct group (or groups) with specific needs and be flexible enough to respond to these needs. They need to be robust enough to ensure that the statutory duties of local authorities, schools and even parents are acted upon. But they need to allow local customisation and experimentation, as well as a degree of flexibility. The emphasis should be on ensuring educational outcomes, rather than regular or sustained attendance at school.

A national body or network is the single most important policy tool to oversee the school education of the children of occupational travellers, such as Ireland's Circus and Fairground Support Service or the UK's network of Traveller Education Services. In countries where provision is devolved to regional level, variation in the level and quality of provision has been found.

Action at European level is inevitably limited since education is a primarily a competence of Member States. But national policy frameworks continue to require a complementary framework at European level and there is scope for action, particularly through the Open Method of Co-ordination. Indeed, much can be (and has been) done at European level in terms of stimulating innovative teaching and learning projects, facilitating networks of professional expertise and creating a platforms for consensus, comparisons, benchmarking and policymaking – as well as raising the awareness of Member States and exhorting them to action where necessary. In the very best cases, the exchange of good practice can lead to the development of quality services in Member States where these had not existed before.



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