

Research



How can early years services improve access and transition into early years settings and primary schools for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children?

PLR0910/005

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Kate D'Arcy

Childrens Workforce Development Council (CWDC)'s Practitioner-Led Research projects are small scale research projects carried out by practitioners who deliver and receive services in the children's workforce. These reports are based in a range of settings across the workforce and can be used to support local workforce development.

The reports were completed between September 2009 and February 2010 and apply a wide range of research methodologies. They are not intended to be longitudinal research reports but they provide a snapshot of the views and opinions of the groups consulted as part of the studies. As these projects were time limited, the evidence base can be used to inform planning but should not be generalised across the wider population.

These reports reflect the views of the practitioners that undertook the research. The views and opinions of the authors should not be taken as representative of CWDC.

A new UK Government took office on 11 May. As a result the content in this report may not reflect current Government policy.

How can early years services improve access and transition into early years settings and primary schools for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children?

Abstract

Recent educational policy and guidance directed at early years education has highlighted the need to improve Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children's access and inclusion within early years provision.

This research project explored how interagency working could put such policy and guidance into practice and considered what this work might look like at grassroots level. The research coordinator used the research to pilot a strategy, which if successful, could be rolled out and shared with other services.

This research used a mixed-method approach comprising action research and quantitative analysis of questionnaires completed by research practitioners. This methodology was found to be effective as it supported the aims and objectives of the research. It also empowered the researchers and the research participants developing practice.

The main findings emerged in four main themes:

- Interagency working
- Professional development
- Training and support
- Sustainability of the work.

This research found that *interagency working* was important for professional development as well as delivering effective services. Action research supported practitioners' *professional development* and had a very positive impact on their confidence in meeting their duty with regard to equality of opportunity. This confidence had a positive effect on their own and their settings practice as professionals shared their learning with other staff.

Training and support was shown to be a very important and effective way to raise awareness of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children's barriers to early years education but also to enable practitioners to feel confident to address such barriers in their settings. The model of practice developed by this research is both *sustainable* and cost-effective and as the research coordinator I would be keen to explore further research opportunities to disseminate this model further.

Kate D'Arcy
January 2010.

Cambridgeshire Race, Equality and Diversity Service

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1. Introduction

This evaluation report is the result of a very positive and productive action research project funded by the Children's Workforce Development Council that ran between October 2009 and February 2010.

The research concentrated upon improving access and inclusion for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in early years education. The focus was driven by the research coordinator's practice within Cambridgeshire's Race, Equality and Diversity Service (CREDS) as she works to improve Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities' access and achievement within education. CREDS is made up of a Traveller Team and a Black and Bilingual Team. Both teams employ teachers, teaching assistants and outreach workers. The capacity and sustainability of their work is secured through mainstreaming their practice via effective partnership working with other services.

The research focus was guided by three key factors.

1. The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage which clearly outlines the duty of practitioners with regard to equality of opportunity, requiring the provision of:

'equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice and ensuring that every child is included and not disadvantaged because of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language or family background, learning difficulties or disabilities, gender or ability (DCSF,2008).'
2. A need to support early years professionals to feel confident to address inclusion issues. The Traveller Team are in an ideal position to support this process as they are specialists in working with Traveller communities and have excellent awareness of equality and diversity issues.
3. A need to empower mainstream services to improve working practice with Traveller families.

This project facilitated action research between the Traveller Team and Early Years providers to address these factors and develop a model of training, support and action that could be rolled out to other localities.

The research participants worked in a variety of early years settings that were predominantly located in East Cambridgeshire. Settings included three children's centres, a primary school, two nurseries based on school sites and a playgroup. A variety of professionals were informants: a playgroup assistant supervisor, a senior crèche worker, a playgroup leader, a pre-school room leader, family involvement workers, and a primary school teacher. The Early Years Advisor for Cambridgeshire County Council actively supported this project and attended the induction and dissemination meetings.

Funding was obtained to offer participating settings free Traveller awareness training and a budget of £300 to spend on Gypsy-, Roma- and Traveller- (GRT) friendly resources. A list of recommended resources was given to settings from which they could choose resources most suitable for their settings (e.g. persona dolls: large dolls that have individual personal histories

made up for them by early years providers; they are very effective in introducing concepts such as valuing diversity and difference).

The aim was that such resources would raise awareness and reflect GRT cultures to all families who accessed settings in the long-term. Examples of the resources practitioners purchased are included in Appendix 1. The research project was timely as many children's centres in Cambridgeshire were just getting started and this project ensured that work with GRT communities could be embedded from the beginning.

2. Context

In order to provide a contextual background and highlight important policy and guidance documents in this field the literature review focused on a number of local and national documents which cover Early Years policy as well as guidance for working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in Early Years. These documents included:

1. The Early Years Foundation Stage framework (DCSF, 2008)
2. Building Futures: Developing Trust – A focus on provision for children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds in the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2009)
3. The Inclusion of Traveller Children: Guidance for Early Years settings (CREDS, 2009)
4. Early Outreach Practice, supporting early years practitioners working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families (Save the Children, 2007).

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework is part of the government's ten-year childcare strategy *Choice for parents, the best start for children* which was a result of the Childcare Act 2006. The framework includes the aforementioned duty in regard to equality of opportunity. In addition the three key elements of the EYFS include: *the early learning goals* which cover the knowledge, skills and understanding children should acquire by five years; *the educational programmes* which are required to be taught to young children; and finally, the *assessment arrangements* to ascertain their achievements (DCSF, 2008). This research explored how interagency working could strengthen local delivery of the EYFS by ensuring better inclusion for GRT children and their families.

Access to Early Years provision

Despite this policy focus GRT pupils have presently had little opportunity to attend any form of pre-school or early years settings, this impacts on their social inclusion, attainment and achievement. There are marked differences in the development and achievement between children who have and have not had access to early years provision. For example, at five years old there is between four to six months difference in child development between those who have attended pre-school and those without pre-school experience (EPPE, 2004).

Young Traveller children are therefore already at risk of underachievement (DfES, 2003). Consequently the DCSF (2009) suggest that:

‘The most effective way to promote the achievement of Gypsy Traveller Children is to ensure they are able to gain early access to education during the Foundation Stage.’
(DfES, 2005:2)

Yet this is not an easy problem to overcome, as there are a number of specific barriers to Early Years provision for GRT children:

Barriers to Early Years access

- Mobile families may lack knowledge of services and if arriving mid-term could find there are no pre-school places available.
- Lack of permanent accommodation or regular evictions may make it impractical to access services.

- Part-time placements may cause practical difficulties for mothers who have a demanding domestic responsibility and transport issues, which are pertinent in rural areas.
- Many parents have low literacy levels and may not have experienced Early Years education themselves. Furthermore, Traveller parents are very protective of their children. There may be a reluctance to place young children in a formal educational setting unless good relationships have been built up. As the following parents' comments suggest:

'She's too little to be able to come home and tell me if something went wrong.'

'I'm worried they won't be looked after; some people don't like Traveller children even if they like children.'

'Someone from the family would have to stay with him – if I can't go with him, can his sister go and stay with him in the place?'

(Save the Children, 2007)

- Traveller parents have concerns about the safety of their young children and the possibility of prejudice, racism and bullying; not only from other families but also professionals.

Outreach and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Families

Staff working in Early Years services are seen as the highest priority in the Government's workforce strategy (Pugh, 2010). The key message to Early Years Professionals regarding GRT communities, is the importance of effective outreach. This is because it simply cannot be assumed that communities or existing outreach workers are aware of services. Direct face-to-face promotion of services to communities and other professionals is essential, rather than through literature and postal information (Save the Children, 2007).

There is a need for Early Years staff to engage actively in equality and diversity issues. This requires a confident practitioner and effective partnership working, as some services cannot regularly deliver outreach. Preventative, well-organised practice consequently becomes crucial to reducing gaps in provision and ensuring that 'Every Child Matters' (DCSF, 2009).

The following research project aims were guided by a combination of the research coordinator's working practice and knowledge, as well as the literature reviewed.

3. Aims of the project

- To develop effective partnership working strategies that could improve access and inclusion in early years for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.
- To identify which aspects of information, partnership working and delivery are best in enabling children's services to improve the access for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families into early year's education and their transition onto primary school.
- To guide Cambridgeshire's Travellers Education Service's practice for the future.
- The project is focussed upon the needs of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, however it is likely that findings will be useful for other 'hard to reach' community groups.
- To provide meaningful opportunities for Early Years practitioners to engage in research that directly benefits their practice and professional development.
- A personal aim for the research coordinator was to develop their project management and research skills.

4. Methodology

The methodology comprised a mixed method approach based on participatory action research. The aim was to involve practitioners in a supported, cyclical process of identifying the issue, action, reflection and review.

The research sample size was small. Seven practitioners were involved, only 28.6% had previous experience of working with Traveller children.

Professional roles	Quantity	Previous experience of working with Travellers
Playgroup assistant supervisor	1	No
Senior crèche worker	1	No
Playgroup leader	1	No
Pre-school room leader/ENCO	1	Yes
Family involvement worker	2	No
Teacher	1	Yes

The small research sample was intentional as it allowed for regular communications and observations as well as support throughout the research project. Halsey (1972) suggests that action research is indeed small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and this enables a close examination of the effects of such interventions.

Action research is valid and purposeful (Cohen & Manion, 2007) as it is considered to be:

- *situational* - it is concerned with diagnosing a problem in a specific context and attempting to solve it in that context
- *collaborative* and *participatory* - the research coordinator was responsible for facilitating action research between the Traveller team and other Early Years providers
- *participatory* and encourages *self-evaluation* - this research project was based on the belief that professionals can benefit personally from taking a closer, critical look at their working practice. Action research allows professionals to develop their research and knowledge bases by supporting them to question, test and improve their practice, and establish a sound rationale for what they are doing (McNiff, 1988).

Part of the conclusion of this report will focus on practitioners' development as a result of the research as well as the research coordinator's learning and professional development from using a mixed method approach.

4.1 Data collection

In order to decide how best to involve practitioners, an initial planning meeting was held as part of the research application process. The meeting involved East Cambridgeshire's locality manager, the manager of the two children's centres in this area, the Early Years advisor for the county, the research coordinator and the Traveller Team's Early Years advisory teacher. 12-13 settings were identified as potential participants and invited to participate. There was a more

positive response from pre-school settings than primary schools, and several head teachers declined. Consequently only one primary school took part and this issue is revisited shortly.

Stage 1: Training/ Launch

An event was held on 5 November 2009 that explained the project focus and process. Most of the day was taken up with awareness training on Traveller culture and the current barriers to Early Years education. The research coordinator and the Traveller Team's Early Years advisor delivered this training. At the end of this day participants were asked to set one or two targets that would address the barriers and be the focus of their research.

This event was followed by support visits on 23 November 2009 from the Early Years advisor and research coordinator. All participants were visited in their workplaces, research aims and objectives were revisited to check on support needed to ensure progress.

Stage 2: Action

Between November 2009 and February 2010 practitioners completed their research targets. An interim network meeting took place on 21 January 2010 to support this process and participants were asked to share progress. In addition, further training on the topic of racism was provided.

Stage 3: Reflection and Dissemination

A final meeting was held on 25 February 2010. This was organised into an event where participants disseminated findings to a wider audience. A big effort was made to invite other local settings and professionals to this event who may be interested and benefit from this work. Data from this meeting is yet to be analysed.

Data collection was focused on information that could support a long-term, effective working strategy that would improve:

1. access into Early Years education settings.
2. transition into primary schools for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.

Data collection was therefore guided by the overall research question. This method draws together all the relevant data for the exact issue of concern to the researcher and preserves the coherence of the material (Cohen and Manion, 2007).

Data was collected during all three stages of the research. Discussions at meetings were recorded through written notes and research participants completed questionnaires at the initial training in November, the interim network meeting in January and the final dissemination in February. The first questionnaire explored practitioners' previous experience of working with Traveller families and their evaluation of the initial training. Questions were also asked about the type of information and resources practitioners felt they needed to improve access and inclusion of Travellers in their settings (see Appendix 2).

The overall aim of the second and third questionnaire was to encourage reflective practice, ascertain practitioners' needs and learning journeys during the research project (see Appendices 3 and 4).

The first questionnaires were analysed with a Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). The second and third questionnaires were qualitative and therefore analysed by thematic analysis and contextualisation of themes. Findings are presented in the next section under the main themes that emerged:

- Interagency working
- Professional development
- Training and support
- Sustainability of the work.

4.2 Ethical Issues

The research coordinator is employed by CREDS to develop projects across Cambridgeshire which enable young Gypsies, Roma and Travellers to gain access, inclusion and higher attainment within education. Her work up until now has been focused upon children within primary and secondary education. This piece of research enabled new insight into the area of Early Years education, which has important and fundamental implications for how children progress in primary and secondary education.

The practitioners who were involved in the research were prepared and informed about the research purpose and methods. This information was shared at the initial meeting where the project aims and objectives were explained and there was the opportunity to discuss the possible benefits and consequences to themselves as partners.

In order to gain informed consent, all participants were asked to read and agree to a letter that explained what the research was about, who was undertaking it, why it was being undertaken and how it was to be published and presented (BSA guidelines, 2002). Participation was voluntary; all questionnaires were structured in order to ensure authenticity and verification of data. In order to secure anonymity, privacy and confidentiality no names of schools, settings or practitioners were used.

The research project was a participatory action research, therefore power/ knowledge relations were considered carefully to ensure practitioners felt comfortable and supported during the research. Any controversial issues were discussed at length with the practitioners eg. examples of discriminatory practice and agreed support was then put in place to help them address such issues.

5. Findings

5.1 Interagency working

Interagency working is important for professional development as well as delivering effective services. Delivering effective services was particularly pertinent where settings had no capacity for outreach. They were able to liaise with family outreach workers to ascertain which Traveller families were in the area who might benefit from their services.

One example of excellent partnership working was between the primary school and adjoining nursery. They decided from the outset to work together and set joint research targets. They met with the children centre's outreach worker to identify local Traveller families and organise visits depending on age and needs of family. They produced a visual information booklet about the activities that took place in their settings and were planning to make a DVD for the same purpose.

Other settings did not have established networks with their schools. This was felt to hinder the transition process into primary as essential information about vulnerable children was not passed on.

Below is a summary of the work produced as a result of the research targets, which strongly reflect the importance of interagency working in answering the research question.

- Interagency meeting to plan how to share important information with Traveller families to ensure they are aware of important dates regarding transition into primary schools and how to access early years provision;
- Collate and share information about funding and grants which could help fund the continuation of Early Years places for Traveller children who may travel for set periods throughout the year;
- Joint persona doll training across two settings and subsequent use of dolls with children in settings;
- Simplifying information about children centre's provision into a visual chart so that non-readers or people with limited literacy skills could understand the programme better;
- Accessible information packs collated and outreach to local Traveller families to inform of provision and services they might like to access;
- Using Gypsy, Roma and Traveller friendly resources within settings, e.g. persona dolls, play trailers, puzzles and fiction books that reflect Traveller children's lives;
- Creating a photo album (visual resource) of the activities that take place in settings to share with parents during outreach visits or initial visits;
- Creating a visual booklet with photographs and pictures to provide basic information about the setting - what is served at lunch, session times and costs;
- Arrange play sessions on a bus that can visit Traveller sites.

5.2 Professional Development

Access to quality Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities is vital for Early Years professionals. In this context action research supported professional development as it provided time and space for practitioners to meet and debate. When combined with reflective

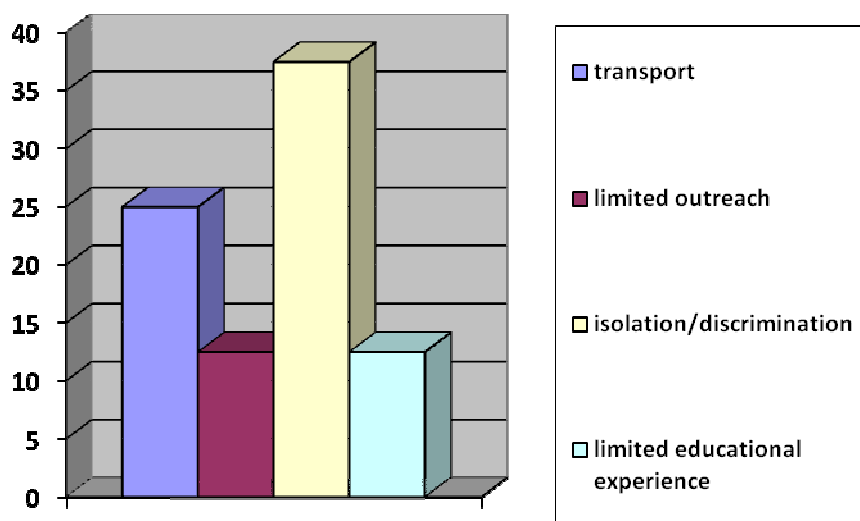
practice, this enables practitioners to step out of their own narrow range of experience and perceive experiences from a range of viewpoints and potential scenarios (Bolton, 2005).

This research facilitated reflective practice and supported professionals to identify the issue, take action, reflect and review. It had a positive impact of professionals themselves and their practice.

It was interesting to note that only 28.6% of the participants had previous experience of working with GRT families. Therefore the initial training was found to be useful and positive feedback was received from all participants. The evaluations suggested that the most beneficial aspects were listening to a Traveller mother speak and receive information that supported good working practice with Travellers. The mother explained how she needed to build up good relations with Early Years staff before she felt comfortable leaving her child in their care, as she had never left her three year old child with anyone other than close family.

After the initial training, professionals were asked to identify the main barriers they perceived for GRT communities in relation to access into early years education, in order to ascertain learning.

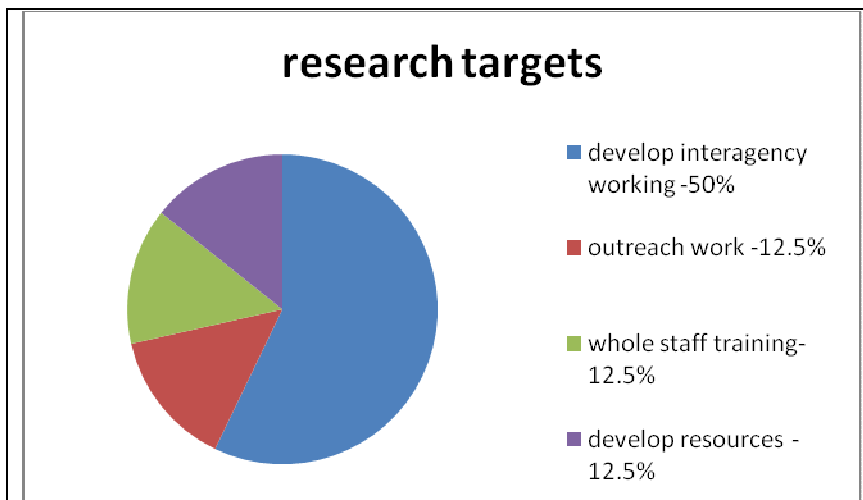
Figure 1. Barriers to accessing Early Years services.



Findings show that limited outreach, lack of transport, isolation/ discrimination and limited educational experience were an accurate reflection of the barriers to successful inclusion into early years education for GRT communities. This information helped practitioners set their research targets which are summarised into four areas below:

- Developing interagency working
- Outreach work
- Staff training
- Develop inclusive resources.

Figure 2. Practitioner research targets.



Action research supported practitioners' learning and had a very positive impact on their confidence in meeting their duty with regard to EYFS requirements and equality of opportunity.

As the research coordinator, I used participatory action research as a tool to bring professionals together, raise awareness and enable reflective learning. I have been very pleased by the impact the research methodology had on meeting all project aims. Action research has played an important part in my own, and others' professional development and practice (Koshy, 2005).

Early Years education is focused upon holistic and child-focused practice. Holistic practice can be defined as an approach which considers the health, wellbeing, care, developmental and educational needs of any child as interwoven and interdependent (Save The Children, 2007). A holistic approach enables a positive response to the unique needs of marginalised communities and I found Early Years practitioners enthusiastic and committed about ensuring that every Traveller child mattered.

5.3 Training and Support

Training

Practitioners clearly benefited from the training provided as part of the project; the two key themes were Traveller awareness and racism. A Traveller mother's input had the biggest impact as practitioners gained direct experience of meeting and speaking to a Traveller mother with young children. The training day was also useful for this mother as she saw how keen settings were to engage the Traveller community.

Practitioners were asked to identify further training if needed. Some felt more of the same kind of generic training about working with Travellers would be useful. Others wanted specific training such as persona doll training to support the Traveller persona dolls they purchased with their allocated funding.

Support

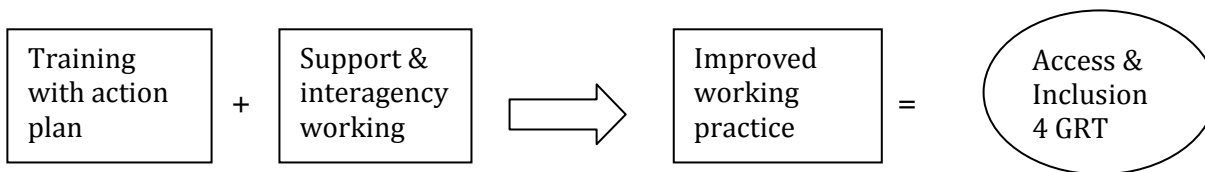
Arranging individual support meetings at practitioners' settings was found to be a very valuable and productive process. It was evident that all professionals had gone back enthused and shared their learning with colleagues. Many asked for subsequent whole staff training for their settings during our visits. Specialist Traveller team support was also useful at the interim meeting where one practitioner was struggling with her colleagues' prejudices towards Travellers which were impacting on her research target and the positive use of GRT resources.

Support from primary schools is important in order to ensure a positive transition from early years into schools settings. Several practitioners felt that networks between themselves and their local primary schools needed strengthening. In order to promote better partnerships the research coordinator invited local primary schools to the final meeting to share research findings and develop networks.

Training and support is therefore very important and effective in raising awareness of barriers to education. It also enables practitioners to feel confident to address such barriers for Travellers in their settings. Whole staff team training can also be beneficial a CREDS Early Years advisor delivered additional, whole staff training to three different settings over the duration of the research.

5.4 Sustainability

Figure 3. Model of practice.



The model of practice developed by this research is both sustainable and cost-effective. This is because the induction training informed and inspired different professionals from a variety of settings. They took information and enthusiasm back to their work places and disseminated effectively. Training and support enabled professionals to address the issues in their own settings and mainstream the work. The research activity supported their professional development and data collected identified the most positive elements of the research project for participants:

- Better insight into Traveller cultures and lifestyles
- Having more confidence in own work
- Improving inclusion through integrated working
- Meeting and talking to other practitioners and a Traveller parent
- Personal development (confidence and an insight into inclusive practices and benefits of interagency working).

This project initiated effective interagency working between different Early Years professionals. Practitioners could, in this context, support each other in their cause by drawing on each other's skills and roles. All participants felt that effective interagency working could encourage links with Traveller families and improve the Traveller communities' inclusion and access. The research coordinator's role was important in setting the focus of the work and bringing people together.

Not only was this model effective in disseminating information and improving working practice, it also proved to be sustainable. Data acknowledged how particular practices would continue beyond the life-span of the research project. These included:

- Investing in more resources
- Using persona dolls in settings
- Attending more training
- Forming links with other settings and holding regular network meetings.

6. Conclusion & recommendations

For this group of Early Years professionals the model of practice developed was found to be sustainable and cost-effective. The research revealed effective strategies in improving access and inclusion into Early Years education for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

- *Interagency working* is a time-effective way of sharing information and developing quality partnerships. This research facilitated interagency working as it provided time and space for practitioners to meet and debate; this was found to be vital in improving inclusive practices as well as professional development.
- *Outreach work*. Integrated working ensured a coordinated inclusion approach, especially where services could not deliver their own outreach. Outreach addresses marginalised communities' isolation and discrimination as communities are made aware of services and supported to access them.
- *Training and Support*. Good access to training and CPD is vital in enabling Early Years Professionals to address issues of equality and diversity in their settings. This research identified a good model of practice which disseminated information and provided support to practitioners in order to improve GRT families' access and inclusion within Early Years settings.
- Parental participation in this process empowers and informs parents about accessing local services. This process develops trusting relationships between services and families that reduce parental concerns about their children's wellbeing and safety.
- *Sustainability*. Having culturally reflective and inclusive resources can help overcome parents' initial, limited understanding of Early Years settings. Activities and the benefits of education for their children can be shared; this also bridges cultural divides.
- Working alongside other professionals to improve inclusive practice develops good networks which can be sustained in the long-term.

This research met all the planned aims and was therefore felt to be very effective. The use of methodology provided meaningful opportunities for practitioners to reflect on and improve practice.

This research has guided Cambridgeshire's Travellers Education Service's practice and partnerships for the future.

As research coordinator I have learnt a great deal from managing and supporting the project. I have been particularly pleased with the methodological approach that promoted reflective learning, in my opinion this is a very effective way of enhancing practice. I would be keen to explore further research opportunities and disseminate this model out to a wider audience to further develop best practice.

Kate D'Arcy
February 2010.

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Appendix 1

Examples of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culturally reflective Early Years Resources

Books

Shaun's Wellies, Norfolk Traveller Education Service

Ruby's Rabbits, Lift the flap book - Norfolk Traveller Education Service

Come and Count with us, Nottingham Traveller Education

Colette goes to school, karentaylor43205@aol.com

A in for Alphabet, T is for Traveller, Oxford Traveller Education

Jell Akai Chavvies, Cambridgeshire Race, Equality and Diversity Service

Jigsaw Pack

Still Roamin'

Poster

Traveller children are part of the community, Norfolk Traveller Education Service

Persona dolls

www.person-doll-training.org

Appendix 2

CWDC Questionnaire 1 – 5th November

- Are you clear about the aims and purposes of this project?
 1. Yes
 2. No – (please see me to clarify before you leave)

- Have you found the training today beneficial , please state particular points that were
 1. Useful

 2. Not useful

- Would you benefit from any further information/training?

- Have you any past experience of working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families or children?
 1. Yes – please describe briefly what this entailed

 2. No

- What do you see as the main barriers for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children's access into primary education in your area?

- How might you address this in your setting(s) as part of this project?

- Please write down your proposed research target?

Name:

Role:

Email:

Phone contact:

Appendix 3

CWDC Questionnaire - January

Name:

Setting:

Please describe what you have done so far as part of the project (or what still needs to happen).

What have been the most positive elements for you?

Have there been any barriers to progressing with this work?

How do you think these actions will improve access into early year's education for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children?

Has this project supported your own personal development?

Yes (and how)

No

Will any aspects of your work be continued beyond the end of this project?

Appendix 4

Final Questionnaire: 25th February 2010

1. Looking back what do you feel you have achieved

- Personally.....
.....
- Professionally
.....
.....

2. How has this project impacted on your working practice?

.....
.....

3. What more needs to be done to improve the access and inclusion of GRT children in your area of work?

.....
.....

4. What support do you need to do this?

.....
.....
.....

5. Would you be willing

- to take part in other projects such as these Yes/No
- sharing what you have been doing with other professionals Yes / No

Name:

Role:

Work place:

Date:

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