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Female Travellers’ Experiences of Guidance Counselling in Adult Education: Observations from the Field

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Female Travellers’ Experiences of Guidance Counselling in Adult Education: Observations from the Field

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Abstract

The proposed changes in the further education sector, including the rationalisation of the VEC’s into Local Education and Training Boards (LETBs) and the closures of the Senior Traveller Training Centres (STECs), have implications for guidance counselling provision to the Traveller community. This article discusses female Travellers’ experiences of guidance based on exploratory research in one adult education centre. The findings highlight low levels of participation in education and employment, as well as the types of barriers experienced by the learners. It also demonstrates 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 forty services providing guidance counselling to adults pursuing education, training and employment opportunities. This includes members of the Traveller community. Despite the advancements in provision since 2000, the need for appropriate quality assurance mechanisms to evaluate the longterm outcomes of guidance interventions for all clients has still to be addressed within the Initiative (Hearne, 2011). In view of the proposed closure of all Senior Traveller Training Centres (STECs) nationally in 2012, guidance on progression options is particularly relevant for adult Travellers at this point in 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 adult education centre, attempts to address some of the issues involved for learners and guidance practitioners.

Context: Female Travellers Experience of Education and Guidance Counselling

Previous research indicates low participation rates at second level by Travellers (Pavee Point, 2005). Therefore, it is likely that adult education has particular importance for Travellers who have experienced gaps in their education. 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 STECs’ on access to appropriate guidance and support in the future. The study involved two focus groups with a total of ten Traveller women, ranging in age from 19 to 26 years of age. There was some variance in their levels of education and qualifications, including FETAC levels 2 to 6. For example, some participants had little formal education, others had attended Youthreach programmes, one had completed a PLC course and another was attending a third level degree course in an Institute of Technology.

The literature refers to barriers to participation in education and guidance activities by Travellers. Some of these barriers are extrinsic, such as the lack of flexible learning opportunities, child care, poverty and discrimination (Hearne 2005; 2010; Lynch 1999). Other barriers are linked with cultural factors such as family commitments and early marriage, gender roles and obligations towards the extended family (Hearne 2010; Hourigan and Campbell 2010; Kiernan 2010). One of the key findings in the literature was the high incidence of exclusion and low participation rates in education by Gypsy, Roma and Travelling communities in the UK and Europe, which was 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 the school curriculum needs to reflect cultural diversity and be made as accessible as possible for children from ethnic minority groups (NCCA 2006). Consideration must also be given to a socially just accommodation of diverse groups in the allocation of public funding (Parker-Jenkins et al, 2005).

Furthermore, in relation to guidance counselling and the Traveller community, Bimrose (2006) argues that 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. She proposes Sue et al’s (1995) multicultural competency framework for guidance counsellors which comprises three main areas of personal development for practitioners. Multicultural counselling theory (MCT) identifies 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, 1996)
1. Female Travellers Experiences of Adult Education

The issue of low levels of participation in education at all levels by Travellers has been highlighted by Pavee Point (2005) indicating that only 40% of all Traveller children of post-primary age attend mainstream secondary school. This reality was highlighted by the women in this study with individual participants citing the lack of value traditionally placed on formal education as a reason for poor school attendance and attainment levels amongst Travellers. For example, one of the learners stated “we never thought of education, we weren’t brought up with it”. In particular, 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). The issue of the poor history of role models within the Traveller community was corroborated by the women themselves in relation to opportunities in education and formal employment. One learner observed “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”.

Furthermore, the women referred to their need to feel comfortable in their education surroundings in order to engage fully with the learning process. Two students of the researched STEC who had progressed on to further and higher education institutions referred to the difficulties they had experienced without the support of their fellow Travellers. Both of them had encountered additional difficulties due to gaps in their prior education which had an impact on their later learning experiences. The learner in further education had “found it very challenging”. Whilst the learner who had progressed to Higher Education stated “I really feel that I had to work extremely hard because my education wasn’t up to standard of third level.”

2. Female Travellers Experience of Guidance Counselling

The provision of guidance counselling by qualified practitioners in the STEC featured in this study is a relatively new phenomenon. The Traveller women had little experience of guidance counsellors either at the STEC or at second level in relation to themselves or their
children. However, it is evident that marginalised and disadvantaged groups tend to be the most reluctant to use support services in a formal institutional context (OECD 2004b; Marris 2004). The participants in this study had engaged with the guidance service at varying levels including group and one-to-one support. The women demonstrated different degrees of understanding of the role of the Guidance Counsellor. 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.

The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2004b) refers to the imperative to match the personal needs and the 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. In addition, the OECD (2004a) recommends that guidance counselling should address the personal, social, educational and vocational needs of learners in STECs. This is significant in light of this study’s findings whereby some of the women highlighted that the guidance sessions were pitched at ‘too high a level’ for them. Furthermore, some participants were uncomfortable with how guidance sessions were delivered and highlighted the importance of building rapport with the Guidance Counsellor. In particular, they identified the importance of continuity and familiarity with education and guidance personnel and the need for guidance practitioners 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”.

The Department of Health and Children identifies a difference in the economic activities of Travellers, with an emphasis on income generation rather than working for a wage (DOHC, 2010). However, the findings of this study suggest that traditional opportunities for self-employment for Traveller men in particular have diminished. This is supported by the Traveller Health Strategy (DOHC, 2010) which finds traditional Traveller self-employment activities, such as recycling and horse trading, have become more difficult with increasing legislation around such activities. Consequently, the majority of Irish Travellers are unemployed and dependant on social welfare payments. In this study, the female Travellers articulated that their guidance needs include practical activities such as form filling, information on courses and job search skills as well as support following closure of the
STECs. This highlights the need for Guidance Counsellors to be familiar with Traveller issues including cultural and economic concerns and the relevance of a multicultural interventionist approach based on the individual needs of the learner.

3. Barriers to Participation in Education and Guidance for Female Travellers

A number of specific barriers for female Travellers emerged in the this study. In relation to barriers for adult learners, Hearne (2010) identifies personal circumstances such as low self-esteem, family commitments and financial concerns as some of the key obstacles to progression. This study concurs with Hourigan and Campbell’s (2010) findings that barriers to participation in education and employment for adult Travellers include prejudice against Travellers, welfare dependancy, Traveller gender roles and family commitments. One learner 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, the effects of previous education experiences can result in a lack of trust and fear of the learning environments (Maddern, 2010). For the participant who had progressed to third level her feelings when starting college were “...walking into college as a Traveller, you’re already looked at. People judge you”.

In relation to praxis, the multicultural counselling approach proposed by Sue et al (1996) identifies the importance of having an awareness of one’s own assumptions, values and biases as well as an understanding of the world view of culturally different clients. This requires Guidance Counsellors to develop appropriate intervention strategies and techniques when dealing with clients from different ethnic backgrouds. The Traveller narratives in this study reflect such issues. Some of the women described how their perceptions of the low expectations of the Guidance Counsellor led to their disengagement with the guidance process. For example, 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”.

The learners also referred to specific gender issues in terms of traditional roles in the family and community. According to the literature, numerous barriers confront Traveller girls and women in education. Lynch (1999) refers to a number of studies documenting the alienation and prejudice which Travellers generally experience in education and points to the lack of research on the experience of Traveller women in such environments. 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 (2000) research also finds that some Traveller women also value having a good education and a career before settling down. Similar viewpoints emerged in this study with some of the 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.”

Despite varying levels of funding supports in further education, the financial barrier still impacts significantly on adults’ participation in educational activities (Hearne, 2010). This obstacle was a recurring theme for many of the women in the study, with one learner stating it was “about making ends meet now”. A specific cultural difference emerged in relation to parenting and finance. Participants 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 that “it’s our job to pay for the wedding”. The cost of child care and cuts in social welfare payments were cited as additional barriers for the learners. 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 Adult Guidance Practice

In conclusion, this article has explored female Travellers’ experiences of guidance in one adult education centre. A number of interesting observations emerged in the field including the necessity for cultural awareness by guidance counsellors working with Travellers, the relevance of further education for female Travellers and the changing nature of the Traveller economy and employment structures within the Traveller community. In terms of guidance
practice, the findings indicate that specific interventions need to be considered when working with female members of the Traveller community. The necessity for culturally sensitive guidance for adult Travellers has been identified (Philips & Eustace 2010). As evidenced in this exploratory study, even though the AEGI provides a range of guidance supports to adult learners the complexities of guidance interventions for the Traveller community is somewhat neglected. Therefore, a multicultural approach that appropriately responds to client needs is advocated by the authors. This would involve the integration 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 STEC’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 (Hearne, 2010) in general, the need for further research with this group of learners is paramount.
References


