The educational experiences of the Traveller community and impact of Traveller-focused initiatives: a qualitative study

Sarah Dirrane, COSMOS Ltd, UK

Dr Lauren Dempsey, UK

Email: sarah@cosmosltd.uk

Abstract Research shows that UK Travellers[1] struggle to combine traditional values with mainstream education, leading to many dropping out of school before gaining qualifications. While there is an appetite for continuing home-schooling, Traveller parents struggle with this.

Lincolnshire Traveller Initiative (LTI) offers Traveller children a structured home-schooling method that is sensitive to their cultural needs. Through 31 qualitative interviews with Traveller parents and children who have engaged with LTI, we explore their educational experiences prior to LTI, and the impact that such initiatives have on their educational outlooks.

We found that while all the children struggled with mainstream schooling, the educational model offered by LTI – a model which was supported by LTI's collaborative partners – helped Travellers to obtain qualifications and explore the possibility of developing their career paths or attending higher education.

This paper has implications for educational practitioners hoping to engage with the Traveller community in the future. Firstly, it underlines the importance of building a trusted connection with the community, as relationships and cultural sensitivity are key. Secondly, it highlights the necessity of offering flexible and adaptable lessons that provide the knowledge necessary for obtaining key qualifications, while still supporting and providing the skills deemed essential in the Traveller community.

Key words Travellers, education initiatives, home-schooling, qualitative research

Introduction

Travellers[1] are one of the most excluded ethnic minorities in the United Kingdom (UK) (Bhopal and Myers, 2009; Marcus, 2019; Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020; Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2022). The term 'Traveller' generally refers to a wide range of diverse groups, such as Irish, Gypsy, Roma Travellers,

New Travellers, Showmen and Boaters. For clarity, the group that was subject to the initiative, and included in this study, derived from the Roma Traveller community. In this instance, the term 'Traveller' is used by the participants and by LTI. Thus, this will be the term utilised in this paper.

A key challenge for Travellers is accessing education in mainstream schools, with most leaving the school system before gaining qualifications (Levinson and Sparkes, 2005; Bhopal and Myers, 2009; Foster and Walker, 2009; Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2022; McGinley and Keane, 2021, 2022). This is because Travellers face numerous barriers to education: some are rooted in internal cultural norms and expectations; others derive from stereotyping at school (Levinson and Sparkes, 2005; Bhopal and Myers, 2009; Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020). While Traveller parents endeavour to offer their children home-schooling as an alternative, the familial emphasis on vocational skills means that children often fail Home-Schooling Inspections (HSIs) (Bhopal and Myers, 2016; LTI, 2024). Thus, Traveller children can be left in an educational limbo, where they feel alienated from school, but also struggle to develop academic abilities at home.

Lincolnshire Traveller Initiative (LTI) has been developed to offer Lincolnshire's Travellers flexible and mobile education that is sensitive to the cultural demands of Traveller children. Through an innovative collaboration with LiNCHigher and Lincolnshire County Council, LTI helps Travellers gain accredited qualifications. This collaborative approach presents a unique solution to the educational challenges facing Travellers, bridging the gap between informal home education and formal schooling. Researchers accessed the Lincolnshire Traveller community through a gatekeeper at LTI, conducting 31 qualitative interviews over 2019 and 2020 with Traveller children and parents who have experience with the Initiative. Through these interviews we were able to consider the barriers to formal education and LTI's impact on academic development.

This exploration has two key implications for practitioners wishing to engage this community in the future. Firstly, it illustrates the importance of developing relationships with this group. Secondly, it showcases how developing an innovative

methodology for teaching and learning supports Travellers in gaining qualifications and broadening their future opportunities.

Literature review

Despite being considered a 'hard to reach' group, the connection between Travellers and education has been studied extensively (Levinson and Sparkes, 2003, 2005, 2006; Bhopal and Myers, 2009, 2016; D'Arcy, 2014; Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020; McGinley and Keane, 2021, 2022).[i] This review examines some of the most prevalent narratives regarding Travellers and education, identifying a gap where further initiatives are beneficial.

While scholars note that it is challenging to gain a statistical insight into Traveller achievement at school (Bhopal and Myers, 2009; Marcus, 2019; Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2022)[ii], recent figures report that 'just 6.3% of Gypsy/Roma and 3.8% of Irish Travellers access higher education by the age of 19 compared to around 40% of all young people' (Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2022, p. 2; see also Gov.UK, 2022), with Travellers rarely reaching academic milestones. Numerous qualitative studies have been conducted to understand why Traveller education engagement is low. Scholars observed the contentious history Travellers have with attending school, where children are often removed from education by the end of primary school (Levinson and Sparkes, 2005; Bhopal and Myers, 2009, 2016; Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020). McGinley and Keane (2021) note removal is due to both 'push' and 'pull' factors. Initially, Traveller children feel 'pushed' away from school as they feel alienated and 'othered' (Levinson and Sparkes, 2003; Smith, 2017; McGinley and Keane, 2021). There have been reports of racism and bullying by their peers, and stereotyping from teachers (D'Arcy, 2014; Bhopal and Myers, 2016; Smith, 2017; Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020; Dalton, 2021; McGinley and Keane, 2021, 2022). However, the 'pull' from the Traveller community can also discourage children from staying in school (McGinley and Keane, 2021). Scholars found that adult Travellers who upheld more traditional outlooks were keen for their children to leave and gain 'real life' skills (Levinson and Sparkes, 2003; Dalton, 2021). Traditional values may therefore discourage further education (Levinson and Sparkes, 2003, 2006).[iii]

Further qualitative studies have been conducted with Traveller children, parents *and* educators, exploring the impact of these barriers on their experiences in education (Levinson and Sparkes, 2003, 2006; Smith, 2017; McGinley and Keane, 2021; Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2022). While these studies offer valuable insight into how Traveller children experience education, these studies focused on engaging with children *who were still at school.* This overlooks the considerable proportion of Traveller children who left school at an earlier age. In response to this gap, both D'Arcy (2014) and Bhopal and Myers (2016) have examined the experiences of home-schooled Traveller children. Bhopal and Myers (2016) conducted a qualitative exploration with Travellers, reporting that the implementation and success of home-schooling varied drastically, where children were rarely taught in a structured manner that followed the school curriculum. Instead, these home-schooled children were typically taught skills considered most appropriate by their parents: for boys, this involved learning the family trade; for girls, this meant learning housekeeping skills (see also Levinson and Sparkes, 2006; Bhopal and Myers, 2016; Hamilton, 2018; McGinley and Keane, 2021 for discussions on gender roles). Scholars have found that some home-schooling Traveller families did prioritise academic development (D'Arcy, 2014; Bhopal and Myers, 2016). However, Bhopal and Myers (2016) reported that support when home-schooling was again highly disparate, where only wealthier families were able to provide their children with external tutorage. This inconsistency in home-schooling provision further indicates why Traveller children struggle to pass the mandatory Elective Home-Schooling Inspections (LTI, 2024; see also Bhopal and Myers, 2016).

There are initiatives that help Traveller children continue in education. The Traveller Education Support (TES) service is considered one of the most valuable initiatives, taking an active role in supporting Traveller children (Levinson and Sparkes, 2006; Bhopal and Myers, 2009, 2016; Smith, 2017). However, the official focus of TES remains on helping Traveller children increase attendance to mainstream schools, and has been subject to financial cuts since 2012 (TES, 2023). The emphasis here is on ensuring children remain in school, not on helping those who have already left. Thus, while there is evidence that the Traveller

community want to encourage children to continue education, they lack the support required to ensure they learn in a consistent manner from home.

This review has highlighted that Traveller children face two core barriers when it comes to education. Firstly, many struggle to feel accepted at mainstream school, and may face cultural obstruction if they remain into their teens. Secondly, they lack the structure and consistency needed to flourish when home-schooled. Thus, there is a current gap in the educational support provided to Traveller children, especially those who have already left school (Smith, 2017).

Lincolnshire, the Lincolnshire Traveller Initiative (LTI) and LiNCHigher

The county of Lincolnshire is the second largest of the English counties and one that is predominately agricultural in nature. Lincolnshire is a mainly rural county, with a low population density. The spatial nature of the landscape is a consideration for LTI when undertaking the delivery of local education initiatives.

In 2006 LTI began offering support for Traveller students aged 11 to 16 who were not attending school, providing them with an alternative home education model (LTI, 2024). This model reflects the cultural values of the Traveller community by offering students a more flexible yet structured form of home-schooling. For instance, members of LTI visit Traveller sites weekly in a purpose-built mini bus, bringing education to Traveller children and offering them a dedicated space to learn. This can include 1:1 tutoring and support, along with general advice and guidance on wider matters, such as college applications and careers guidance. LTI also offers education tailored to each child's educational needs, mapping out their progression over time and developing their capabilities. This model provides a new way of working for Traveller children by circumventing the 'blanket' approach of mainstream education, and the often 'random' method of home-schooling (LTI, 2024).

LTI is able to provide flexibility while still creating tangible learning outcomes by partaking in a collaboration with LiNCHigher, who support LTI by facilitating HE campus trips, providing resources and funding, and by encouraging the take-up

of the Prince's Trust Awards (PTA) (Future Focus, 2024). PTA offers alternative awards for children from underrepresented backgrounds who struggle with mainstream education. These qualifications span across multiple topics (such as digital skills, money management and healthy lifestyles) and can provide learners with a qualification equivalent to A Levels (Prince's Trust, 2024).[iv] In endeavouring to help Traveller children gain qualifications, LTI open opportunities to progress into further education and/or broaden their potential career paths.

LTI follows an Innovative Practitioner Model when working with this community. Principles underpinning the Model include the consideration of three core culturally-sensitive factors when building an initiative: (1*) Offer time and location flexibility*, facilitating learners' education from a setting they feel comfortable in and via a flexible schedule, allowing them to maintain their traditional lifestyle around education. (2) *Prioritise building trusted relationships*. This research has shown that an educator who understands the culture is necessary for ensuring both parents and learners feel comfortable with non-Travellers engaging with the community. Building long-term relationships that lead to word-of-mouth recommendations within the community is key. And (3) *Adapt subject matter around personal interests* to aid engagement and show learners that education can be multi-faceted and applicable to everyday interests.

The rest of this paper will consider the experiences of Traveller children and parents who have engaged with LTI, qualitatively exploring their perceptions of education and the impact of this initiative.

Methodology

LiNCHigher commissioned researchers to conduct qualitative research into how Travellers on Lincolnshire sites experienced the LTI, and any impacts it had on their educational perspectives or actions.

Scholars have noted that the Traveller community can be hard to recruit for research, due to their concerns that they may be misrepresented (this derives from previous experiences of being harmfully represented in media (Dalton, 2021)). Therefore, it was beneficial for this research to seek the help of a gatekeeper.

Gatekeepers act as a mediator between the researchers and the community participants, and typically have a close, trusted relationship with the community (Keesling, 2008). The use of a gatekeeper allows researchers to access a typically isolated community and ensures that the research process is comfortable and straightforward for participants (Levinson and Sparkes, 2006; McFadyen and Rankin, 2016). Here, the gatekeeper is an LTI tutor who has formed relationships with the Lincolnshire Traveller community and is considered a trusted figure.

The gatekeeper made the initial contact with familiar members of the community who were involved in LTI. From here, a snowball-sampling methodology was implemented. This approach is beneficial when speaking with harder-to-access communities who cannot be easily contacted (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). Furthermore, as most of the sample were approached by their peers, rather than by the gatekeeper or the research team, we could have extra assurance that these Travellers were willingly partaking in the study.[v]

An interviewer conducted 26 one-hour semi-structured interviews in April 2019: 15 with Traveller learners aged 12 to 16; 11 with parents of children engaging with LTI (see Table 1 for the sample; pseudonyms have been used for anonymity).

Table 1 Sample information

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education level pre-LTI	Education now
			Learners		
1	Carrie	16	F	Primary	7 PTA
2	Daniel	14	M	Primary	1 PTA
3	Simon	14	M	Primary	2 GCSEs
4	Eliza	12	F	Primary	Started PTAs
5	Esther	15	F	Primary	7 PTA
6	Lauren	15	F	Limited Secondary	6 PTA
7	Lyla	15	F	Primary	4 PTA
8	Maria	-	F	Primary	5 PTA
9	Scott	15	M	Limited Secondary	6 PTA
10	Cameron	12	F	Primary	5 PTA
11	Saskia	12	F	Primary	7 PTA

12	Sally	15	F	Primary	4 PTA
13	Siobhan	-	F	Primary	-
14	Sandra	-	F	-	-
15	Simone	-	F	Primary	5 PTA
Parents					
1	Sarah	-	F	-	-
2	Alexa	-	F	Primary	-
3	Lily	-	F	Primary	-
4	Myra	-	F	Limited Secondary	-
5	Mel	-	F	Primary	Gaining help with literacy
6	Mandy	-	F	Primary	-
7	Saskia	-	F	Limited Secondary	Started with PT modules
8	Jake	-	M	Primary	-
9	Jasmine	-	F	Primary	-
10	Daniel	-	M	Primary	-
11	Carmel	-	F	Limited Secondary	-

They also conducted five return virtual/phone interviews in Spring 2020 with five of the original sample's parents to explore how their children were progressing with LTI during Covid. All Participants were incentivised with a £10 voucher.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and then analysed using thematic analysis, which allows for a flexible and open-minded approach to investigation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was taken to identify codes and develop themes from all participants' transcriptions (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Themes were coded using the software Nvivo to facilitate collaborative analysis and categorisation of themes. Initial coding was carried out by a research assistant and main themes were agreed with another member of the research team. All sub-themes were then collectively reviewed and agreed upon within the research team. This form of multi-staged collaboration and reviewing is considered vital for ensuring clarity of insight (Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical considerations

Our research adhered to the Market Research Society's code of conduct (2023) and was approved by Bishop Grosseteste University's Research Ethics Committee.[vi]

Researchers met with the gatekeeper first to obtain guidance on how to conduct each interview. He provided methodological guidelines based on his extensive knowledge of the Traveller community. For instance, he advised researchers to adopt an informal, casual approach to interviews, and to avoid taking notes or filming while interviewing (audio recording was permitted). (See also Levinson and Sparkes (2006) for a similar approach.)

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in how the discussions were conducted and meant they could be adapted around participant needs (both in terms of interview location and length). This less rigid approach to research was considered in-keeping with the more fluid lifestyles of Travellers (Levinson and Sparkes, 2006) and minimised participant dropouts.

Finally, every effort was made to ensure participants were comfortable with the process, through the initial use of the gatekeeper, the snowball-sampling methodology and the option to perform the interview flexibly (especially in 2020, when interviews were conducted virtually/over the phone).

Results

The analysis resulted in three key themes regarding Travellers and education: (1) Traditional perceptions of education, (2) Experience of prejudice, and (3) Future education aspirations. We also uncovered a fourth theme exploring responses to LTI: (4) The impact of LTI and Traveller-focused educational initiatives.

The initial two themes support the findings covered in the literature review. However, it is still beneficial to discuss them here as they demonstrate that Travellers across the UK – despite their varied lifestyles and norms – continue to endure similar barriers to education, adding to the existing academic literature. In Theme 3 we will explore the finding that despite these barriers, the majority of our participants were now open to further education, and that a minority would consider university, building

on existing knowledge. Each of these themes provide highly pertinent context for why these Travellers responded to LTI in the manner examined in Theme 4.

Both stages of research (from 2019 and 2020) yielded the same key themes regarding Traveller experiences with education, thus they are combined in this article.

Theme 1: traditional perceptions of education

Our research found that aforementioned concerns about mainstream education were evident in the Lincolnshire Traveller communities. Both learners and parents reported several motivations for not staying in education beyond primary school, many of which related to the 'Traveller lifestyle' norms and ideals.

For instance, all parents reported that there was a cultural expectation for children to leave school at an early age:

> 'I went to school to about the age of nine. I learnt to read and write, the basics, and then I was fetched out. Obviously, I was of a generation – they didn't believe in secondary schools or college….' (Lily, Mum)

This expectation was passed on to their children. Jake noted that he followed the practises of 'traditional' parents to protect his children. He removed his daughter from school as he was concerned attendance may damage her reputation:

> 'If they go to the secondary school, then boys will start spreading false rumours about them, that they've been messing with boys […] Then it will scandalise the family or the child […] No Travelling man would go near them, because they'll say, "She's been messing outside".' (Jake, Dad)

Fear of ostracisation from his own community motivated Jake to raise his daughter in a 'sheltered' manner where, for example, she was removed from school before Sex Education began, stating:

> 'I know it's old-fashioned, but that's the way it's always been.' (Jake, Dad).

Furthermore, most participants discussed upholding traditional gender norms, which discouraged them from remaining in full-time education, especially when it was seen to interfere with their prime 'role'. For instance, Carrie (learner) struggled to remain at school because she felt a sense of responsibility to be at home:

'With me being a young Travelling girl, I've got to clean and help in the household and stuff like that. They're my responsibilities and my lifestyle. […] You wouldn't be able to do [housework and school]. It wouldn't fit in.' (Carrie, learner)

Traditional values and lifestyles were seen to conflict with Traveller associations with mainstream school, thus all in the sample were removed from formal education (see also Levinson and Sparkes, 2005; Hamilton, 2018; Dalton, 2021).

Theme 2: experience of prejudice

Although numerous barriers to education were rooted in traditional narratives, most participants also had first-hand experience of negative behaviour at school, where they encountered alienation and stereotyping.

For instance, while almost all participants had 'settled' in Lincolnshire sites, two reported that they still follow a nomadic lifestyle. Nomadic parent Mel attempted to keep her children in education but described bureaucratic processes that often resulted in her child not being accepted into school. For example, Mel describes the challenge of contacting a new school each time she temporarily settled. This was most recently for a four-week period, causing difficulties:

'We used to move quite regularly, and it used to be really difficult to try and get [my sons] into schools across the country […] I'd ring [a school] and they'd say, "No, you've got to go through the council" […] And then they'll say, "Well, it could take six weeks…".' (Mel, Mum)

Consequently, Mel stopped attempting to enrol her children at school. Thus, while only approximately 20% of Travellers are considered nomadic (Bhopal and Myers, 2009), it is still worth noting how the complex process of school enrolment impacts on Travellers' chances of attending school.

Furthermore, 12 out of 15 learners discussed feeling anxious at school, encountering prejudice from teachers and other children. For instance, Eliza left education in primary school, noting how she felt isolated:

'You felt like you were out of place and the teachers didn't like you […] I think it's because we were Travellers and they just don't like us.' (Eliza, learner)

Parents also reported that teachers did not help support their children. Alexa illustrates this when relaying the experiences her son had at his third school, where he was labelled as 'naughty', despite having previously been considered 'good in class':

> '[My son] came out of school a little bit earlier. The Head Teacher definitely had a thing [against] Travellers […]. He was never really a naughty kid and he's just very mellow but he did seem to have a bit of an issue with a few of the boys and [the Head Teacher…] expelled him for a week […] He was waiting to go back into school, looking forward to his work, and she called him into the office before he even got to go into class […] I'm outside waiting in the hallway and I can hear her screaming at him [… I thought] "you're not giving him a chance now", and she just was a bit abusive. So, I just took him out.' (Alexa, Mum)

All parents and eight learners disclosed that children were bullied at school for being Travellers (also found by Smith, 2017; Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020; Dalton, 2021):

> 'My second eldest, she went in for six weeks and she was bullied. She was hit in the head, punched, called not nice names.' (Lily, Mum)

The fear that their child could be seriously injured resulted in many parents removing them once the bullying became too severe.

Finally, parents reported that even beyond school, the non-Traveller community may express strong prejudices that go unchallenged. Five participants mentioned that they were not ashamed to be a Traveller, but that they would not want to 'shout about it' in case they were treated differently (see also Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2022). This impacted their work prospects after school, where they felt they were discriminated against due to being a Traveller:

> 'If you live in a small little town like this a lot of people know you're gypsy, they don't want to employ you.' (Mandy, Mum)

They therefore withheld information about their Traveller identities to avoid discrimination. These Travellers referenced school as one of the first places they encountered such prejudices, shaping their sense of self and perception of non-Travellers well into adulthood.

Theme 3: future education aspirations

Despite the concerns and negative experiences outlined above, all participants saw clear benefits to education. Mothers especially discussed why they wanted their children to receive educational opportunities, with Myra stating:

> 'I want her just to have a chance of getting her foot in the door, of getting a job.' (Myra, Mum)

Mandy reiterates with this sentiment, noting:

> 'I didn't go to school, and I don't want my kids brought up like I was brought up. I did want to read and write but mum and dad were sort of set in their ways….' (Mandy, Mum)

Thus, parents wanted their children (particularly their daughters) to receive an education. For many, education equates with the option to lead an independent lifestyle. Jake even hypothesised that education could help his daughter gain financial stability, avoiding an unhappy marriage:

> 'They can say to their husband, "I don't have to take your abuse. I don't have to listen to this. I don't need you. I make my own money". It gives them their independence. That is priceless.' (Jake, Dad)

Furthermore, all participants felt that a formal education was now essential, with Esther noting they may struggle to gain employment without qualifications, as:

> 'The world is turning into a different place where you need certificates and education.' (Esther, learner)

Overall, learners were optimistic about their futures, with aspirations to continue education and build careers (also noted by Levinson and Sparkes, 2006; Hamilton, 2018; Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020). Eleven learners discussed wanting to attend college or start a business:

> 'I was scared to do the whole college thing but now I've got a place and I can't wait to actually go and do something for myself and have a bit more confidence in myself and just do what I want to do.' (Esther, learner)

These goals were typically gendered, where female learners hoped to work in hair and beauty, and male learners sought qualifications in a trade:

> 'I want to do all block paving and that, and get a certificate for it, so, then I can do, like, contract work as well and it'll be easier to get work.' (Simon, learner)

> 'I want to do hair and beauty and get my qualifications, so then, when I get older I can have my own business.' (Eliza, learner)

The priority here was to gain qualifications for career progression. There was less motivation to attend HE, especially university. For learners, it appeared they were concerned about the length of a degree and how it might impact other aspects of adult life, particularly marriage:

> 'I have thought about college and I was going to go but I just want to get a job and start earning my own money and have my own independence. It's three years to fully complete [university]. I know I'll most probably be married by then, in three years' time, so that's why I wouldn't go.' (Carrie, learner)

For parents, university still felt unfamiliar, and something they had not considered yet:

> 'I don't know whether it'll be good or not. I absolutely know nothing about university.' (Mandy, mum)

Therefore, their reported apprehension regarding university derived from inexperience on the subject (highlighting an opportunity to build their understanding of HE).

This section illustrates that – despite adhering to traditional values by leaving formal education early – these Travellers are keen to explore where education could help them, either professionally or academically. As such, there is evidently a need to ensure learners have enough opportunities (and qualifications) to expand their futures, highlighting the necessity of initiatives such as LTI to support these aspirations.

Theme 4: LTI and the impact of Traveller-focused educational initiatives

Prior to encountering LTI, these parents faced the prospect of home-schooling themselves. This was a concern for all parents who did not feel comfortable educating, as:

> 'Not all Travelling parents are that educated to help their children.' (Myra, mum; see also D'Arcy, 2014).

LTI's key aim is to help Traveller children who have left school to continue in education, in turn alleviating the pressure on parents (LTI, 2024). Thus, these parents were relieved to have LTI provide structured home-schooling:

> 'That's why I contacted LTI, because I thought I'm not going to be able to have a structured education but with LTI, it is structured. There's a plan. Because home-educating, it is very, very hard [...] I know people that are not from the Travelling community that have wanted to home educate, but they don't hardly get any support.' (Saskia, Mum)

As aforementioned, parents and other members of the Traveller community could act as a pivotal barrier or motivation for learners to remain in education, so by alleviating parental concerns, LTI opened the opportunity for learners to continue education.

Once introduced to LTI, all parents continued to be impressed by the initiative. For instance, Alexa appreciated that LTI lessons respect traditional values regarding learning practical skills, while still encouraging academic progression:

> 'I think education's important because the children need to obviously learn some of the skills, but then where it's with the culture, it clashes [...] But the (LTI) bus, it's perfect, really, because obviously they're still getting some of the education that they need and the skills that they're getting...'. (Alexa, Mum)

This was in part due to the proximity of the lessons (where the use of the minibus allowed the learners to remain on site), but also due to the close relationship that was built between parents and tutors at LTI, where there was mutual respect. For instance, LTI tutors have helped Lily's three children earn qualifications:

> 'It goes a long way when you can trust people, have somebody come in your house and you can trust them with your daughter. I mean, [LTI tutors will] come and I'll just

potter about. It's so much easier for her. So, [LTI] have been with us a long while.' (Lily, Mum)

Furthermore, Alexa praises the efforts of an LTI tutor to help her son:

> 'She's come herself twice with the bus on days when the bus is not meant to come, just out of her own time, to finish the Prince's Trust for [my son…] and just tried to help him get these courses finished […] You don't get many people like that, do you, to cut their own time to do it.' (Alexa, Mum)

Finally, all parents noted a positive change in their children's attitudes, where their confidence grew through participation in the initiative. For instance, Mel was pleased to see her son develop an interest in Japanese culture through LTI, leading to an aspiration to visit Japan:

> 'He is more confident and he's thinking about different things that I would never have thought he'd have wanted to do.' (Mel, Mum)

One of the most revealing outcomes was that four parents started partaking in LTI/gaining PTA themselves. This illustrates that not only is the LTI education-model benefitting new generations, but it can also encourage older generations to return to education:

> 'I've had no [qualifications] until I met [LTI]. I'm learning as we speak. [LTI] are helping me […]. I've got some qualifications already, I'm over the moon with them actually […] I've got two for social care. I passed one last week before the school holidays.' (Mandy, Mum)

The learners also felt the positive impact of working with the LTI. For almost all learners, this was the first positive experience they had with education. Daniel, for example, struggled in primary school. Thus, his experiences with LTI boosted his confidence and sense of pride:

> 'I was really proud of getting my first Prince's Trust certificate because, when I was in school, like primary, I wasn't really a star pupil. I wasn't really good at much. […] Now I have a PTA] I had to start telling people, "Yes, I got this certificate". It was the first thing that made me proud of myself because it was the first thing that ever led to something.' (Daniel, learner)

This was also the first time they found an environment that suited their educational needs. LTI provides flexible forms of

teaching, where, for instance, Maria enjoyed learning with other Travellers on the bus:

> 'I already knew that [my friend] was doing it, so we sort of just went together.' (Maria, learner)

Lauren flourished when taught one-to-one at home:

> 'When I was in school, I never used to volunteer for any of the group projects… I never used to put my point across. [But] when they used to pull me out for one-to-one, they used to see a lot better work in me because I could talk to them, just me and [the teacher] with no-one interrupting us. So, obviously, then when [LTI bus] came out, I realised it was the exact same thing…'. (Lauren, learner)

LTI acknowledged Lauren's discomfort in a group setting so began offering her one-to-one lessons in her own home. This flexibility was further evidenced by LTI moving their lessons onto Zoom during Spring 2020 in response to COVID-19, allowing Travellers to continue their education.

Furthermore, the format and focus of the education felt relevant and engaging for the learners, as they were able to pursue topics they were personally interested in, developing modules and gaining PTAs in their own time:

> 'My favourite [module] is the one I'm doing at the minute […] I could pick, and I picked amateur boxing. I've enjoyed that one probably the most to be honest. I did a PowerPoint on it.' (Scott, learner)

This model moves away from the reported lack of flexibility in mainstream school: by bringing these learners a more adapted education model suited to their interests, it is possible to encourage consistent dedication to gaining qualifications.

While the last section highlighted that university is not currently their main priority, all learners mentioned having discussions with parents and tutors about attending further education, made possible by PTA. Eight learners discussed feeling excited about the prospect of attending college, and parents were confident in motivating them, with Scott (learner) stating, 'my mum and dad obviously encourage me to go to college'.

One parent captures how crucial LTI was in shaping her daughter's outlook on her future:

> 'Her confidence has gradually just come out. She's chattier. She's even considering when she's turning 16, looking for a

> bit of a part-time job. Whereas, she probably wouldn't have thought of that a year and a half ago, but now she's thinking, "Right. When I turn 16, get my CV and if I'm in college, I'll get a little weekend job." […] If it wasn't for people [at LTI] there wouldn't be the opportunities out there for Travelling kids now.' (Lily, Mum)

Discussion

This research has uncovered that many of the pre-established barriers Travellers face in education also exist in Lincolnshire, where participants encountered both resistance from their own community and rejection from non-Travellers. This sense of alienation was exacerbated by how challenging home-schooling can be for both parents and children. As a result, many Travellers are left without formal qualifications, impacting their future opportunities.

LTI offers a unique educational approach that respects the Traveller lifestyle while encouraging the continuation of education. It bridges the gap between mainstream education and home-schooling, allowing Travellers to move beyond the educational limbo they were previously experiencing. By providing Traveller children with a more structured approach to home-education, LTI aids their acquisition of PTA and allows them to consider future education or career paths that were previously inaccessible. This even inspired parents to consider education, disrupting the patterns set by previous generations.

Finally, while these participants remained apprehensive about university, it was evidenced that they were open to further education if they understood why it may benefit their own careers and aspirations.

This research provides insight into why Travellers struggle with mainstream education, and, in turn, how a Traveller-oriented initiative can shape the future of this often neglected group. By adapting educational models to be flexible and culturally-sensitive, it is possible for practitioners in other parts of the UK to engage with their own Traveller communities and increase their access to education.

Limitations and recommendations

There are recommendations for both education practitioners and further research.

Firstly, this research has illustrated how local educational initiatives can have positive, long-term implications for Travellers, thus we recommend that similar initiatives are implemented in other areas of the UK. We recommend that practitioners wishing to engage with Traveller communities consider utilising the methods used by LTI, as illustrated in the novel Innovative Practitioner Model cited earlier in the paper.

Despite visiting participants on two occasions, we were only able to gain a limited understanding of how these Travellers felt about HE, as they had only recently commenced/completed their PTA. It would be beneficial to explore further why they felt reluctant about university, and what activities from collaborators such as LiNCHigher are most valuable for encouraging consideration of HE. This will allow for future initiatives across the UK to develop HE-focused material and activities in their syllabuses.

Finally, we recommend future research engages with learners and parents over an extended period, from initial engagement with an initiative to beyond their attainment of qualifications. By engaging with varied communities longitudinally, it will be possible to further capture the tangible outcomes of these initiatives as participants age and enter further education or workplaces.

Acknowledgements

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[i] There are many sub-groups who may fit under the term 'Travellers' but maintain different cultural values. However, this term is often used in the UK as an overarching describer for these different sub-groups. While scholars have identified issues with using blanket terminology (Bhopal and Myers, 2009, 2016), they have also noted the importance of adopting the terminology used by the people at the centre of research (Bhopal and Myers, 2016). In this instance, the term 'Traveller' is used by the participants and by LTI. Thus, this will be the term utilised in this paper.

[ii] This is a multi-faceted problem. It is challenging to gain Census information from Travellers due to nomadic lifestyles, and fear of misrepresentation in figures. Furthermore, Travellers may misreport ethnicity for fear of being subject to prejudice (see Danvers and Hinton-Smith, 2022).

[iii] While both 'push'/'pull' factors are believed to shape Traveller approaches to education, Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2022) warn against placing too much emphasis on cultural 'pull', as this undermines the challenges Travellers face in the education system.

[iv] LTI offers a varied curriculum typically focusing on functional skills, but as the participants in this research referenced PTA as their main goal, we will also focus on PTA experiences and outcomes in this article (see LTI (2024) for more details on their wider curriculum).

[v] Bound (2012) discusses the imbalance of power when a gatekeeper is solely responsible for producing samples.

[vi] LiNCHigher collaborates with Bishop Grosseteste University to encourage consideration of HE.

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