

Louise

Louise (Photo G. 1) is four years old and is the second youngest child in a family of five children from the Traveller community. The children's ages range from eight to two and a half years. Louise is a talkative, sweet natured little girl. At home, Louise likes to play with her baby brother and enjoys bouncing on her trampoline and playing on the swing. She likes going to the park with her Mum and visiting her neighbours in the street where she lives. Louise attends a pre-school for Traveller children called St Fiachra's Pre-School in the north-west of Ireland.



Photo G.1: Louise

North West Travellers' Project - Background and context

The North West Travellers' Project is located near a large town in the north-west region. The service caters for both nomadic and settled Traveller children and was established in 1996. The project is defined by the childcare manager as *a partnership of both Travellers and settled people committed to improving the quality of life for Travellers in the county and in the wider north-west region*. She stated that the overall aim of the project is to *promote the social, political and cultural rights of Travellers as an ethnic group in Irish society and the regeneration of Traveller culture*.

Since its formation in 1996, the North West Travellers' Project has developed a number of strategies and initiatives designed to tackle social exclusion and disadvantage experienced by Travellers, including a childcare initiative. Since 1997 the project has provided affordable childcare for staff, trainees and members of the wider Traveller community, including nomadic families. The childcare initiative aims to meet the needs of children in a range of age groups from seven weeks to twelve years. The service includes full day care, sessional pre-school and after-school services.

St Fiachra's Traveller Pre-School

The pre-school service is offered from 9.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m. Monday to Friday for children aged from two years and ten months to five years. The service currently has capacity for 16 children and approximately 10-12 children attend the service each day. Children who attend the pre-school can then attend the full day care programme in the afternoon if their parents are working or participating in training.

The Department of Education and Science funds the teacher's salary²¹ as well as 98% of the cost of a bus to collect the children from home each day and bring them back in the afternoon. The staff team consists of one teacher, one assistant and a Visiting

²¹ In addition to funding for a school bus, the Department of Education and Science funds a qualified teacher's wage in Pre-Schools for Traveller children. All additional funds needed to run the Pre-school are raised by the voluntary Parents' Committee through fundraising activities.

Teacher for Travellers who works closely with the Traveller project in advancing the capacity of Traveller parents to support their children's learning and in establishing good working relationships with schools.

Curriculum and assessment

Staff stated that it is particularly important that the curriculum and routine offered to the children develops from a blend of the children's abilities, needs and interests and can be differentiated according to the time of year. For example, as the group caters for nomadic Travellers; these children could arrive in the group at any point during the year. As Nomadic Traveller children are always moving around they do not get to know people very well and it can be more difficult for the children to form relationships. Nomadic Traveller children love outdoor play so their arrival at the pre-school means that lots of outdoor activities are incorporated into the routine to ease the transition.

Children's interests develop and change at particular times of the year for example, good weather brings talk about moving and the inclusion of nomadic Travellers; different fairs take place, and there is a lot of talk about horses and *sulky racing* (using a single seat carriage with two long poles attached to the horse). These unique cultural dimensions of the Traveller pre-school require ongoing adjustment and flexibility on behalf of the staff and children over the course of the year.

As well as listening to the children, assessment practice consists of ongoing observations and a two-way process of communication between staff and parents. The childcare team including crèche and after school staff, meet on a monthly basis for planning meetings. This gives all individuals who have contact with the children in one or more of the childcare services an opportunity to share information about the children's progress in learning and development. Pre-school staff assist children in compiling folders as an ongoing activity over the year and to collect examples of their work including photographs.

At the moment all information regarding children's learning and development is relayed verbally to parents on an informal basis. It has been agreed that part of the work of the

Parents' Committee in the coming year will be to draw up a sheet which will formalise this structure and allow for the regular dissemination of written information to parents.

Louise's experiences in St Fiachra's Pre-School

Louise joined the pre-school two years ago and attends five days per week. Louise gets up at 7.45 a.m. in the morning and the school bus comes to collect her at 8.20 a.m. She arrives in pre-school around 9.00 a.m. When the pre-school session finishes at 12.00 p.m.; the bus takes Louise to the full day care service provided by the project where she stays until her Mum finishes work at 5.00 p.m.

Table 10: A day in pre-school for Louise

8.20 a.m.	The school bus collects Louise from her house. Louise's Mum takes her on to the bus and makes sure she is wearing her seatbelt. Louise's Mum says that Louise is <i>always happy and excited about going to pre-school</i> .
Arrival 9.00 a.m.	Louise arrives at St Fiachra's Pre-school with her friends. She takes off her coat and hangs it in the hallway.
Activities 9.00 a.m.	Each morning Louise is usually drawn to creative activities such as paint and collage. This provides Louise with an opportunity to participate in an activity which interests her whilst at the same time catching up with all the news from her friends.
Snack 10.15 a.m.	Louise usually has a drink of orange juice and a biscuit for her snack. She chats happily with Carrie during snack. The teacher uses snack time as not only an opportunity for children to take relax for a short while but also to reinforce pro-social skills such as table manners and taking turns in conversation.
Activities 10.30 a.m.	As Louise is interested in many different things, she spontaneously moves around the playroom dipping in and out of activities that interest her.
Tidy up 11.00 a.m.	At tidy up time, Louise helps to tidy up the home corner and put all the table top activities away in the cupboards or on the shelves.
Outdoor play or music and movement 11.10 a.m.	Each day the children either go outdoors for a run around or stay indoors to participate in music and movement activities.
Storytime 11.30 a.m.	The teacher encourages the children to sit on the carpeted area in preparation for a story. Louise listens intently and is able to ask and answer questions at the end.
Preparation for	The Teacher gathers all the children together in the hallway to

departure 11.50 a.m.	prepare them for departure. Louise can put on her own coat and collects her painting and art work from the table at the top of the room. She chats happily with her friends and recognises the sound of the bus as it pulls up and parks outside the school.
Departure 12.00 p.m.	<p>The bus arrives at the pre-school and all the children form a line and file out one by one into the bus. The teacher accompanies the children into the bus and with the help of the bus driver ensures that all the children are seated properly and wearing seat belts. Louise smiles and waves to her teacher from the bus window.</p> <p>The bus takes Louise to the full day care service provided by the project at a location approximately three miles away where she stays until her Mum finishes work at 5:00 p.m.</p>

Well-being

Louise told me she liked coming to pre-school because *it is good fun and because you have to go to school*. The pre-school itself is a bungalow style building with an entrance hallway leading to a small kitchen area and toilet facilities. Louise spends most of the pre-school session in a large rectangular playroom which is divided into distinct play areas such as the messy play area, the role play/home area, the book area and the creative area. The environment has a variety of equipment and resources and is brightly painted and inviting to children.

Louise interacts with her peers, agreeably playing with and alongside other children and taking turns in conversation. Louise commented to me that her *best friends are girls because the boys take things off you*. Louise has a particularly close friendship with Carrie and I rarely saw one without the other close by. Louise explained to me that she liked lots of things in the pre-school but her favourite area was the home corner as she *likes feeding the babies and putting them to bed*. Louise's love of babies showed many times during my visits as she brought the subject into conversation in many different contexts. To facilitate this interest, pre-school staff plan activities around caring for babies through the use of books and pictures, and by providing resources to support imaginative and role-play in the home corner area.

According to Louise's Mum, this interest was also evident at home, where Louise often played house involving Louise acting as the 'Mammy' and her younger brother as the baby. Her Mum commented that Louise's favourite place to play at home was the spare

room (there are no toys in this room, just some old furniture) which Louise has called *the secret room*. This is a special place for Louise and her brothers and sisters which her Mum said *is clearly a children only zone*.

Louise commented that she doesn't particularly like going outside to play when she is at pre-school because *the boys just run and run fast and sometimes you fall and get hurt*. The group does not have any outdoor equipment for gross motor play and activities outdoors usually consist of ball games, playing with bubbles and circle games. The teacher is very aware of Louise's reluctance around outdoor play at pre-school so she attempts to balance this by including lots of music and movement activities in the programme. She commented that on the days she announced to the children that they needed to tidy up in preparation for music and movement activities, Louise could be heard encouraging the other children to tidy up quickly so that they could get started as soon as possible. Louise said that she loved to dance and move to *all kinds of music* and that she *likes the fast ones best* (Photos G.2 and G.3). During my visits, I observed her move with confidence and control and become really absorbed in what she was doing.



Photos G. 2 and G. 3: Louise dancing to music

Louise appears to have good relationships with adults in the group and I observed her talking affectionately about her teacher. She said the best thing about her teacher was that *she dances with her and shows her what to do*. Throughout my visits, Louise

displayed high levels of independence and self confidence and seemed very interested and motivated to learn.

Identity and Belonging

Louise seems very comfortable in the setting and she displays a real sense of belonging to the group. She demonstrates this through her self-motivation to organise her day and to participate in activities of her own choosing. By doing this, Louise is developing her own sense of identity as a learner and has the confidence to make and express choices. The teacher supports Louise's learning and development by listening to her expressed wishes and using these opinions to inform her planning of activities for Louise. For example, the teacher is aware of Louise's interest in creative art and dancing so she ensures that these activities are part of the daily routine where possible.

The pre-school staff maintain good links with Louise's parents and the routines, customs and regular events of the Traveller culture are strongly reflected in the curriculum. Using themes like horses, and finding out about different countries in Europe, staff explore different aspects of Traveller culture meaningful to the children. This is where listening to the children becomes an integral part of early years practice in the pre-school in order to be aware of what is happening at home and to capture what is meaningful and interesting to the children at a given time. To assist this process, children are encouraged to make books about themselves which involves drawing pictures of what they like or don't like; people in their family and where they live.

The emphasis on the Traveller culture within the curriculum allows Louise to explore and express her cultural identity alongside her peers through art, craft, music and dance. Various festivals and celebrations throughout the year provide accessible and relevant opportunities, particularly when adults from the Travelling community are invited to participate. Adults from the Travelling community occasionally visit the children in the pre-school to tell stories of the days gone-by, to play music and sing songs. Louise's Mum pointed out that in her experience, it was often a challenge when children transferred to primary school as aspects of the Traveller culture were little understood and not sufficiently incorporated into the curriculum. She believed that this could result in

confusion for the children when the link was not continued and the disparity between home and school could widen.



Photo G.4: Louise drawing a picture

Displays of Louise's art work also promotes a sense of belonging to the group and when the teacher draws attention to her individual contributions, a positive sense of ownership and belonging is promoted for Louise. Each day she likes to tell her Mum what she did in pre-school and regularly takes home drawings and pieces of work which she takes pride in showing to her family (Photo G.4). Communication with parents and parental involvement takes many forms in the pre-school. For Louise's Mum, this includes participating on the Parents Committee, updating herself through reading a monthly newsletter and informal meetings with Louise's teacher.



Photo G. 5: Louise reading *The Hungry Caterpillar*

Communicating

Louise mentioned that one of her favourite places in the pre-school was *the book corner*. She can spend long periods each day exploring the books and narrating stories aloud to her friends and sometimes to the dolls (Photo G.5) During my visits her favourite book was *The Hungry Caterpillar*. She could retell the narrative in the correct sequence and draw upon the language patterns in the story. She could change her voice to reflect the different emotions in the story and laugh at parts which she found funny. She listens attentively to various stories and responds to what she has heard by making relevant comments and asking questions with confidence.

Whilst narrating *The Hungry Caterpillar*, Louise was particularly interested in the part when the caterpillar got tummy ache. She was able to relate this to her own experience of having tummy ache after a party. She said like the Hungry Caterpillar she had eaten *too much sweets and cake*. I observed Louise's teacher using verbal scaffolding to enhance Louise's knowledge and to extend her current level of understanding beyond that particular context. She used a variety of techniques such as open questioning (*Why do you think the caterpillar ate so much food?*), restating and expanding on what Louise had said (*because he was hungry ... but how did he know he was hungry?... Did he not have his breakfast?*) and helped her to relate this information to different situations (*What is your favourite thing to eat at home when you are hungry?*).

The teacher commented that Louise's interest in books and stories was one of the aspects that she found particularly rewarding when supporting Louise's learning and development. She said that Louise listened attentively during group story time which was usually the activity that ended the pre-school session each day. She recalled how Louise used the information from a story she had heard and applied it to another situation or context sometimes four or five weeks later. A good example of this was when a story called *Lucy's Quarrel* (a story about two young children falling out over who was boss!) was read to the group. A few weeks later Louise was able to say to her teacher that two children who had fallen out over a toy in the pre-school should hug and make friends like in the story.

Her teacher remarked that Louise often incorporated painting and drawing activities into most daily sessions in the pre-school. This provides a valuable outlet for her thoughts and feelings and she often communicates her own 'take' on events using this medium. She demonstrated this whilst making a card for a childcare student called Mary who was leaving the group as her placement had come to an end. Louise had developed a good relationship with Mary and commented to me, *I'll miss Mary because she helped me to draw things*. To communicate these feelings Louise drew lots of heart shapes on the card and decorated it with pictures of flowers which she said Mary liked. At the end of the session she presented the card to Mary and gave her a hug. Throughout this activity the teacher interacted sensitively with Louise and encouraged her to extend her use of language. She introduced a number of describing words to illustrate colours, patterns and textures, and then encouraged Louise to talk about her creation.

Louise's Mum commented that she would like the Traveller language Cant more actively explored and promoted within the activities of the group as this form of language is unique to the Traveller culture. Although Cant words vary in different parts of the country, there are general words like the words for tea, sugar and milk and she felt the children could play a key role in ensuring that this tradition did not completely die out.



Photos G.6 and G7: Louise playing with playdough

Exploring and Thinking

Louise is interested in most activities and likes lots of variety. She enjoys taking time to explore activities by herself and is confident to try out new things. Louise frequently

requests an opportunity to play with playdough (Photos G.6 and G.7). She makes lots of different things with it including cakes and buns and bakes them in the oven in the home corner. A variety of equipment such as cutters, rollers and trays allows Louise to participate in this type of imaginative play. Whilst making a birthday cake Louise added glitter to the finished cake and said she wanted *the candles to sparkle*.

Louise actively participates in art and craft activities such as painting, drawing, collage work and cutting. Each day she spends some time during the session making a picture from collage materials or by cutting out pictures from cards and magazines. As most of these activities take place in a group, this provides Louise with the opportunity to develop co-operation skills. Throughout her play, she demonstrates a good ability to share resources and work co-operatively with other children in the group. Louise's Mum commented that Louise loved to bring pieces of work home to show to her family and that she responded well to praise and encouragement for her efforts.



Photos G.8 and G.9: Louise involved in sand and water play

Louise seems to like time to herself and can become completely absorbed in activities like water and sand play (Photos G.8 and G.9). She usually spends some time each day at the water tray repeatedly emptying and filling different sized containers. This is usually when the other children are engaged elsewhere and the teacher recognises Louise's need for time and space to herself and does not disturb her when she becomes engrossed in activities like this.

There is a small outdoor area to the front and side of the building which looks directly onto peaceful open fields where horses, sheep and cattle can be seen grazing nearby. Although this is an idealistic and visually picturesque setting for the children, the high windows of the pre-school prevent children from taking advantage of the outdoor scenery on a daily basis.

Although Louise commented to me that she preferred not to play outdoors at pre-school, in contrast her Mum told me that Louise liked to play outdoors at home and was quite confident to investigate and explore her immediate neighbourhood and to visit her friends who live nearby. Following a trip to a leisure facility last year; her Mum reflected that Louise could still recall the events of this trip in some detail and regretted that the family couldn't do things like this more often. As the family has no transport of their own; it makes regular trips and days away difficult. Louise's Mum explained that the family tried to go on a day out to the beach at least once a year.

Conclusion

Louise's parents view the pre-school as making a very positive contribution to Louise's education. They reported the main benefits as *mixing with other children and getting a sense of what school is like*. Louise's Mum said that this pleased her especially as historically Traveller people have lower levels of education than settled people. She is adamant that her children will be able to avail of opportunities to be educated.

Louise seems happy and secure within the pre-school where she learns with and alongside others in a learning environment which affirms and respects her cultural identity. She expresses herself creatively and imaginatively and is developing her own individual ways of thinking, exploring and understanding.