

**An Coiste Comhairleach Náisiúnta
ar Chiníochas agus Idirchultúrachas**

**National Consultative Committee
on Racism and Interculturalism**

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Education Disadvantage Committee to assist development of a Traveller Education Strategy

**The Traveller Education Strategy – as part of an
intercultural education strategy in Ireland**

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Introduction

The NCCRI welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Education Disadvantage Committee to assist development of a Traveller Education Strategy.

The NCCRI was established in 1998 as an independent expert body on racism. It is a partnership body, which brings together government and non-government organisations to develop initiatives and to provide expertise in tackling racism and promoting interculturalism. The overall role of the NCCRI is:

- To act as an expert body to develop an integrated and strategic approach to racism, to focus on its prevention and to foster interculturalism within Ireland
- To inform policy development and seek to build consensus through dialogue in relation to the issues of racism and interculturalism
- To promote the understanding and celebration of cultural diversity within Ireland
- To establish links with other organisations or individuals involved in issues of racism and interculturalism arising from developments at European Union and international levels.

This submission will be divided into three key parts. The first considers the context of racism and discrimination against the Traveller community in Ireland. The second part focuses on the identification of the Traveller community as a minority ethnic group. The final section recognises the significance of an intercultural approach to education in facilitating equality of outcomes for all minority ethnic groups, including the Traveller community.

1. Context

As the Scope and Terms of Reference of the Traveller Education Strategy acknowledges, despite the recommendations of the Task Force on the Traveller Community in 1995 there continues to be ongoing and emerging challenges in relation to securing equality of educational outcomes for members of the Traveller community.

Traveller access and participation in education, as indicated by enrolment, continues to be very mixed. On the one hand there has been significant resources and enrolment of Travellers at preschool and primary level. However, the progression of Travellers from primary to second level dramatically reduces from year one in secondary school where there is 100% progression from primary school, to year three when only 29% of Travellers remain in second level school and by year four only 6% remain (Table 1: Percentage progression amongst the Traveller community).

Table 1: Percentage progression amongst the Traveller community in the secondary education system. Source: TFTC/Department of Education and Science

Year	%	Year	%
1	100	5	7
2	56	6	5
3	29	7	0.3
4	6		

The education report submitted to the Monitoring Committee of the Task Force of the Traveller Community in November 2002 stated that:

It is to be acknowledged that the drop out rate for Traveller children has been unacceptably high. Greater efforts will be made with the assistance of the Education and Welfare Board in particular to encourage Traveller children to remain in school until they meet the statutory age requirement.

According to a recent newspaper article, 'less than 20 per cent of 12- to 15-year-old Traveller children attend second level, and of those who do most leave the education system within two years'.¹ The European Commission on Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) second report on Ireland refers to the fact that 'Traveller children have in the past faced extreme marginalisation as regards access to education in Ireland, often being entirely excluded from the schools system, places in segregated classes, or dropping out of the system early'.²

There have also been recent incidences of racism against the Traveller community from other parents. This was vividly illustrated by a dispute in a small County Galway primary school in 2001, when all non-Traveller children were withdrawn by their parents when Travellers were enrolled in the school.

Identified key factors inhibiting educational achievement in the Traveller community include:

- Lack of expectations by Traveller parents and teachers of Travellers progressing at second level
- Withdrawal of male students to help out in supporting the Traveller economy
- Likely failure of some schools to maximise and effectively target the extra resources they are given for Traveller education
- The withdrawal of children from mainstream classes into separate classes
- Failure to acknowledge and to accommodate Traveller culture and in some instances institutional discrimination plays a role in excluding Travellers from schooling
- The historic legacy of social exclusion experienced by Travellers over many years
- The disruption caused by evictions, which have been made considerably easier by recent legislation
- Poor conditions on existing sites such as lack of an adequate supply of running water and lack of access to washing machines that make washing school clothes difficult, as well as the lack of adequate space for children to do homework.

Given this overall context it is unsurprising that minority groups within the Traveller community can face additional and specific difficulties in terms of education and training. For example the Monitoring Committee Report pointed out that:

the requirement in the Community Employment Programme for participants to be signing on the Live Register has particular implications for many Traveller women who tend to marry at a younger age than settled women. This is of particular importance to Traveller women who wish to progress on from training programmes to employment opportunities face as they find themselves caught in the 'income trap'.

¹ ASTI puts Traveller school needs in focus, www.ireland.com, (09.07.2003)

² ECRI, Report on Ireland 2001, p. 21, available at: www.ecri.coe.int (28.01.04)

Despite the recommendations of the Task Force Report in 1995, and the many initiatives, which have been implemented since then, there remain serious problems in relation to securing equality of outcome for the Traveller community. Given the context of ongoing challenges facing the Traveller community the NCCRI welcomes the proposal that the Strategy for Traveller Education would necessarily review developments in the ten years since the Task Force began its deliberations.

2. Recognising Travellers as an Ethnic Minority

Until recently the Government has been non-committal on the question of recognising Travellers as an ethnic group. This was reflected in the equality legislation (1998 and 2000) where they were recognised as a separate ground for protection against discrimination as opposed to being included under the ‘race ground’.³

However, this position has now clearly changed. In the draft report to Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Government’s position has hardened to one of explicitly not recognising Travellers as an ethnic group. The First National Report states that:

In regard to the scope of the report it should be noted that Irish Travellers do not constitute a distinct group from the population as a whole in terms of race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin.

This position was confirmed by a parliamentary question in October 2003.

This position is inconsistent with Government action in other areas of policy where Travellers are recognised *de facto* as an ethnic group. For example, the involvement of Traveller representatives in the co-ordinating committee for the European Year Against Racism (1997), the NCCRI and the Know Racism national public awareness programme. Similarly, Ireland has reported on the issues facing Travellers and the progress made by the State in addressing these issues under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and in its report on the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities where the bulk of the report concerned Travellers. In fact the report on Travellers included in the appendix to the CERD report describes Travellers in a way that is befitting a standard definition of an ethnic group, ‘Irish Travellers (population 24,000) are an indigenous Irish community with a shared history of a nomadic way of life and cultural identity’.

To date the Government have not set out a detailed rationale for this change and have not made clear what, if any direct policy implications of such a move are going to be. However there are concerns among Traveller groups that the move is in some ways symbolic of a perceived hardening of a policy position towards Travellers in recent years and there has and will be policy changes arising from this position.

Given the current uncertainty it is imperative that the Traveller Education Strategy takes into account the concerns of Traveller groups, and acknowledges the specific difficulties

³ Ideally in the equality legislation the grounds of ‘race’ and the ‘Traveller community’ would have been combined in a single ground more properly named the ground of ‘racism’ – with Travellers named amongst the range of issues and categories covered.

which are faced by Travellers in accessing education by virtue of their membership of a minority ethnic group.

3. An intercultural approach to Traveller education

The NCCRI welcomes the objective identified in the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003-2005 'to increase the number of Traveller children benefiting from education and to integrate Traveller children into mainstream education to the maximum extent possible'. However without a commitment to the 'type' of educational system, which Travellers are integrated into, these objectives will continue to be undermined.

An education system which does not actively promote anti-racism, and respond to the particular needs of minority ethnic groups, including the Traveller community, will not be in a position to maximise the benefit of specific strategies and promote educational outcomes.

Recent policy statements and initiatives have recognised that what is needed is an education system which fully reflects the diverse composition of contemporary Irish society. The NCCRI advocates a holistic approach to intercultural education, which recognises the need to support diversity in all sectors of the education system. In other words interculturalism should underpin all aspects of education including, though not limited to, pedagogical approaches, curricular content, school structures and administrative procedures.

Intercultural education would serve to both to undermine racism and discrimination, as well as promote a broader understanding of and respect for diversity in Irish society; two factors which have undermined the educational outcomes of the Traveller community. By recognising the diverse needs of minority ethnic groups in Ireland an intercultural education system will provide a key tool in facilitating equality of outcomes for the Traveller community.

In short an intercultural approach to education needs to be at the core of any strategy, which seeks to develop 'policies with necessary supports to enable Travellers to achieve greater integration while respecting their distinctive life' (National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003-2005).

Conclusion

By virtue of their minority ethnic group status, and despite recent initiatives, Travellers continue to suffer marginalisation, including discrimination in the Irish education system. A broad ranging intercultural approach to education is a key mechanism for overcoming inequality of outcomes for minority ethnic groups. The Traveller Education Strategy should both recognise the particular difficulties facing the Traveller community as a consequence of their minority ethnic group status, as part of a broader approach by the Department of Education and Science to frame education policy in an intercultural context.