

An investigation into why Traveller children's attendance levels are comparatively lower than that of settled children and how Irish Primary Schools are helping to overcome this challenge



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I am a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT), after recently completing the Bachelor of Education programme in Marino Institute of Education. I decided to conduct my research on Travellers in education as it is a topic I feel strongly about. I have had much experience in many different schools and classrooms in which I've had the opportunity to work with children from the Travelling Community. From both my experience and research it is evident that not all children feel as though they belong or are valued within their school communities. It is my hope and ambition to ensure that as a teacher I can provide a safe, welcoming, diverse and caring environment for all children in my class in the future. This research has allowed me to gain an insight into the reasons behind some children's feelings of a lack of belonging, it has also helped me to understand how I can prevent this from happening for the children in my class. All children have a right to an education, as Liz Fosslien stated (n.d.): "diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice and belonging is having that voice be heard". It is our role as educators to ensure all children in our care feel valued throughout their education.

KEYWORDS: Primary Education, Traveller Education, Attendance, Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to investigate the relatively low levels of attendance and attainment of children from the Travelling Community in Irish primary schools. The research was conducted using documentary analysis. It is hoped that possible reasons behind low attendance rates amongst Traveller children will be identified and examined. The researcher also sought to investigate how schools are implementing and supporting the importance of improved attendance levels among Traveller children. The multiple programmes and interventions that the Department of Education and Skills (DES) have put in place in order to improve the educational experiences of Traveller children in DEIS schools will also be explored.

The reason and motivation for choosing this topic was because, although I had a positive experience throughout my education, feeling as though I belonged and mattered within society, following research and some school placements it is evident that not all children feel this way. It is essential that all children feel valued and respected no matter their identity or ethnicity. As a settled teacher it is my responsibility to foster this respect and ensure all children in my class and school community feel they belong and are valued by all. It is hoped that the research presented in this article will support teachers and other educators in providing an inclusive, welcoming, and safe classroom environment for all children regardless of their race, culture, or ethnic minority group. This article is a fragment of a broader dissertation which explored many factors that influence Traveller children's rates of attendance in education and also how primary schools are supporting children of the Travelling community to improve their levels of attendance.

CONTEXT

There are 30,987 Travellers currently living in Ireland, which accounts for 0.7% of the Irish population (CSO, 2018); they were "first formally recognised as an ethnic minority in Ireland in 2017" (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2017 as cited in, Hanafin, et al., 2018, p. 45). "Travellers and Roma are among the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in Ireland" (National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, 2017-2021, p. 2) and research shows that this marginalisation is particularly evident within their experiences of education.

Patrick McDonagh made a statement that "education is the biggest problem facing the Travelling Community" (Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, 2019, November 26). According to the Central Statistics Office Ireland (CSO, 2019) 6 in 10 Traveller males have only achieved primary level education. That accounts for 57.2% of the male Traveller population. Similarly, only 13% of females from the Traveller Community achieve upper

secondary level education compared to 70% of the settled population (CSO, 2019). It must be noted that there are many reasons that influence the attendance and retention rates of children from the Travelling community in school. Historic low levels of school completion, experiences of bullying in school, parents' experience of education, and exclusion in the classroom are to name but a few of the influential factors that have an impact on Travellers' educational experiences.

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) have stated that Travellers are fifty times more likely to leave school without a Leaving Certificate in comparison to the non-Traveller population in the country. These statistics are harrowing and are evidence that research in this area of education is warranted. Former Minister of Education, Joe McHugh (Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, 2019, December, 3), acknowledged that there is an "enormous challenge" to overcome in respect to Travellers in education. The awareness of the problem is evident, yet why are the figures of Traveller children staying in education still so low? Martin Collins, Co-director of Pavee Point, a group that was formed to improve the rights of Travellers in Ireland and bridge the gaps between Travellers and settled people, stated that "Traveller children are falling between the cracks" with regard to the education system in Ireland (Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, 2019, November 19). "Education is not a luxury it is an actual right that all children have in this country" (Joyce, Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, 2019, November 12).

All children on the island of Ireland have a right to be treated equally within the education system regardless of their culture, background or ethnic group. However, statistics and research show that now, in the 21st Century, this is still not the case and many Traveller children are often discriminated against on a daily basis throughout their years of education. These findings are evidence to the fact that there is a critical need for extended research into why Traveller children's levels of attendance continue to be much lower than that of settled community children, and to examine how schools, teachers and the Department of Education can best address this difficult and continuous challenge.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for the research was documentary analysis. Documentary research consists of the use of primary and secondary texts such as books, journal articles, newspaper articles and population censuses in order to gather information on a topic. Fitzgerald (2007) describes documentary research as quantitative or qualitative "analysis which encourages readers to locate, interpret, analyse and draw conclusions about the evidence presented" (p. 279).

While Denscombe (2010) stated that there is a significant advantage with the amount of documents available and how easily they can be accessed it is important to note that some documents may be biased and therefore not accurate. It must be understood that many of the articles used as part of research for this dissertation were written by settled people and therefore there was a greater risk of bias present. Nevertheless, the author was critical in their research and ensured that the documents they chose were free of bias by analysing the documents with authenticity, credibility and meaning (Briggs & Coleman, 2007).

It is recognised that there are limitations to this research methodology. Documentary analysis focuses on secondary sources alone (Bohnsack, 2014), meaning interviews with Travellers to ascertain their perceptions of education could not be carried out. While many readings were informative and insightful it must be noted that conducting surveys and interviews would have added a more personal element to the research from the point of view of members of the Travelling community in Ireland.

While all research on this topic is relevant and important, there is a need for current research to be conducted. Much of the research gathered from readings is from several years ago and some of the information may not be relevant today. As a result of possible outdated research being explored this can impact the accuracy of the findings and information explored in this paper. This supports the author's statement above that current research on this topic is essential.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

One of the overall aims of this research was to investigate and understand reasons that influence Traveller children's attendance rates in Irish primary schools, what the influences are on their attendance levels, and how are schools and the department helping to counteract this trend of poor attendance among children of the Travelling Community.

TRAVELLER CHILDREN'S PEERS AND TEACHERS HAVE A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF TRAVELLER CULTURE, WHICH INEVITABLY AFFECTS TRAVELLER CHILDREN'S ATTENDANCE IN IRISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS.

Research shows that both teachers and settled students engaging with Traveller children have a lack of understanding of Traveller culture which inevitably impacts on Traveller children's attendance. Traveller children admitted to "feeling lonely" (Joyce, Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, 2019, November 12) in school with no sense of belonging because of this lack of understanding of their culture. This lack of understanding consequently results in poor relationships for Travellers with their settled peers and teachers. Children of the

Travelling community face racism, bullying and discrimination within the school environment (Bloomer, et al., 2014). There is evidence to suggest that this bullying and discrimination towards Travellers is purely as a result of their ethnicity and cultural background (Bloomer, et al., 2014). Conneely (2020) also found evidence of such discrimination in a recent survey, when it was revealed that two out of three Travellers feel discriminated against because they are a member of the Travelling community. Fights, derogatory name-calling and being ignored in class (Bloomer, et al., 2014) are to list but a few of the forms of discrimination Travellers face. While these negative experiences affect Travellers' attendance rates it must be noted that a study by Devine, et al., (2008) showed that several non-Traveller children were noticed "sticking-up" for their ethnic minority peers amid racial bullying. This research supports the engagement with anti-bullying policies that many schools around the country have in place, it also holds a sense of hope that Traveller children may begin to have improved experiences in school if bullying is deemed unacceptable by all children.

However, Karl Kitching (as cited in Holland, 2018) made the observation that teachers too, engage in such discrimination. Kathleen Lawrence, a member of the Travelling Community spoke of her negative experience with teachers. She noted that teachers ignored her in class, had low expectations of what she could achieve and that they had little understanding of her culture (as cited in Holland, 2017). Additional research by Bhopal (2011) revealed that a number of teachers held negative opinions and attitudes towards Traveller children in their care; nevertheless, it must be noted that this study only represents a small number of teachers and therefore cannot be generalised for all educators in primary schools. The majority of teachers are "white females of upper middle class" (O'Brien, 2018) and from the settled community, which significantly adds to Traveller children's lack of belonging in school as they are not represented in the teaching profession. However, it must be noted that this trend is slowly changing and members of the Travelling community such as, Owen Ward, Temera O'Brien and Chrisdina O'Neill are evidence to such change as they are embarking on a journey to enter the education system as teachers. Nevertheless, these individuals only account for a very small percentage of the thousands of teachers in the country. Bloomer et al., (2014) still states that Traveller children are one of the most bullied groups in the school community; this bullying and lack of understanding of their culture has drastic implications on their rates of attendance (Biggart, et al., 2009).

THERE IS A LACK OF AND NEED FOR THE INCLUSION OF TRAVELLER IDENTITY AND OTHER ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS WITHIN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN IRELAND. THIS LACK OF

INCLUSION ULTIMATELY AFFECTS CHILDREN'S SENSE OF BELONGING AND IMPACTS THEIR ATTENDANCE LEVELS IN SCHOOL.

It could be argued that Travellers' beliefs and values are not represented in the curriculum. Catherine Joyce (Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, 2019, November 12), made the statement that it is extremely difficult for Travellers to feel any sense of belonging in school as their living experience, culture and identity are not reflected throughout the curriculum. Ainscow (2005) believed that inclusion is one of the major challenges facing schools and educational systems around the world. This is evidence to the fact that proper inclusion of all beliefs and cultures is not widely recognised in all schools and therefore there is a need for its improvement. The Department of Education and its teachers have a responsibility for such improvement in ensuring that all children in schools around the country feel a sense of worth and belonging as they journey through the education system.

Dr Katriona O'Sullivan (as cited in; O'Brien, 2018) suggests that there is a need for schools to reflect the diverse nature of Irish society. Research has shown that many teachers choose not to engage in intercultural dialogue with their class as they feel there is a lack of support, they too admit to feelings of low self-efficacy (Bryan, 2010; Bryan & Bracken, 2011; Lodge, et al., 2004). With the lack of opportunity to learn about Traveller culture and history many Traveller children do not feel as though they belong in school, they do not feel respected or valued and these are important indicators of inclusion (Miller & Katz, 2002; as cited in Hanafin, et al., 2018). As a result of this lack of knowledge and engagement with Traveller culture in the curriculum, children from the settled community often lack understanding of their Traveller peers, which as stated can lead to bullying and discrimination.

Traveller children are rarely visible in textbooks (Bhopal, 2004; Moloney & O'Toole, 2018), or in the school environment itself. It is important for all children of all cultures to see themselves both in their surroundings and in their learning (O'Sullivan, 2018; as cited in O'Brien, 2018). Bhopal (2004) believed a possible change in the curriculum to be more flexible of Travellers' interests and needs could solve the problem of exclusion. However, if the Traveller Culture and History Education Bill (2018) were to be introduced officially all children would have an understanding of Traveller identity which inevitably could break down many barriers. This Bill would benefit all children in schools, but especially, Traveller children and their families as they would feel represented in their learning in school. In 1995, Dwyer noted that teachers believed a deeper understanding of Traveller culture would benefit both them and all their students in school; however, in 2021 the level of knowledge of Traveller culture amongst educators is still

inadequate. There is a significant need for this Bill to be approved in order to improve the educational experiences and sense of belonging of Traveller children in Irish primary schools.

It must be noted that the Yellow Flag programme is making significant progress in developing understandings of many cultures in Irish schools. The Yellow Flag programme was first established in 2008 by the Irish Traveller Movement in response to Travellers' experience in the education system (ITM, 2018). The aim of the programme is to help schools and teachers provide a welcoming, intercultural environment and classroom for all students in their care. Often in school "children may not see people like themselves pictured in books, or people like themselves working as teachers in their school" (ITM, 2018, p. 7). However, the Yellow Flag programme offers teachers supports in including and exploring many different cultures and beliefs through the hidden curriculum. The overall ambition of the programme is for children to "be proud of themselves, their community and culture" (ITM, 2018. p. 14). However, this programme is not implemented in all schools and therefore many schools, teachers and students still lack knowledge of what a diverse classroom and school setting entails. As the ITM (2018) expressed in the Yellow Flag Handbook "cultural diversity will not be a barrier, but rather a reason for success" (p. 9) and therefore the Yellow Flag Programme should be introduced to all schools in the country.

SCHOOL PROGRAMMES IN DEIS PRIMARY SCHOOLS ARE CRUCIAL IN SUPPORTING TRAVELLER CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES IN TACKLING POOR ATTENDANCE LEVELS.

While Traveller children continue to face discrimination throughout their journey through the education system it is to be acknowledged that the many supports in place in DEIS schools across the country have provided the opportunity for an improved educational experience for the children in their care (Weir et al., 2018). Supports such as the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) programme and the School Completion Programme (SCP) have proved to be vital in improving rates of attendance among Traveller children. Research by the ERC and the Department's inspectorate in 2011 concluded that "there is clear evidence that the DEIS Programme is having a positive effect on tackling education disadvantage" (as cited in DES, 2016, p. 4) and further research by Smyth et al., (2015) stated that the "rate of change in retention is better in DEIS schools than non-DEIS schools" (p. 6). This research suggests that the programmes and initiatives in DEIS schools have and continue to make a difference in the rates of attendance and school completion not only for Traveller children but all children experiencing educational disadvantage. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the 2016 Census stated that 4,539 Traveller children attended DEIS schools and that 3,848 Traveller children attended non-

DEIS schools (Tickner, 2017). This finding poses the question for those Travellers in non-DEIS schools and whether their needs are being catered for in regard to supporting them through their education and implementing strategies to improve their attendance levels.

CONCLUSION

This research sought to identify some of the possible reasons behind poor levels of attendance in school among members of the Travelling community. Following documentary analysis, it is evident that there is a lack of a sense of belonging within education for Traveller children, which ultimately has an impact on their attendance levels in school. Members of this minority ethnic group face discrimination from both their teachers and settled peers as a result of the lack of knowledge of Traveller culture. This lack of knowledge stems from the disappointing fact that Traveller culture is not well represented throughout the curriculum or ordinary school life. While programmes such as the Yellow Flag offer support to teachers and students in promoting inclusivity for all children, the Yellow Flag programme has only been implemented in 80 schools across Ireland to date and therefore it is clear that there is a need for more promotion of this initiative within schools across the country. The Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill (2018) needs to be integrated into the primary school curriculum. The implementation of this Bill would offer a significant improvement in a sense of belonging in schools for Traveller children and their parents. It would allow them to have an opportunity to learn about their own culture, be able to share their own personal experiences and fully contribute to discussions about their learning, thus leading to possible increases in rates of attendance.

While Traveller children's attendance levels are still much lower in comparison to their settled peers it is important to acknowledge that there have been significant improvements for all children experiencing disadvantage in their education. Supports such as the SCP and HSCL are fostering such improvements however, in order to support all Traveller children in education these programmes need to be introduced and implemented in all primary schools. This would allow for positive relationships to be formed between the home and school for all Traveller families, and hopefully improve levels of attendance.

Recommendations:

The author has made the following recommendations in the hope that these suggestions can be implemented and result in improvements for members of the Travelling community in their education in the future.

- Teachers should be offered the opportunity to engage in courses that offer both understanding and methodologies of how to engage in lessons around the topic of Traveller culture. Initial teacher education courses should too have an element of learning about ethnic minority groups in Ireland.
- The Yellow Flag programme is significant in helping schools create a more inclusive environment and in providing supports and resources to teachers for lessons of interaction with different cultures. Many schools across Ireland are now more diverse in the cultures and beliefs of children in their schools and henceforth the Yellow Flag programme should be implemented in all schools.
- The Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill too needs to be passed and integrated into the primary school curriculum.

Overall, the researcher found this study to be very valuable as a future educator, because an improved understanding of Traveller education was gained, which has allowed the author to now know and understand how to ensure their future classroom will be a welcoming place for all children regardless of their cultural background. The author hopes that the recommendations stated can be implemented and will result in improvements in the education system that will support members of the Travelling community in their education in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have been of great support to me throughout my research and writing of this dissertation. I would sincerely like to thank my dissertation supervisor Feargal Ó'Laighin, for all his help and guidance. His patience, advice and support given to me has been endless and for that I am eternally grateful. I would also like to thank Dr. Aimie Brennan for her guidance at the start of this journey, her support through lectures was greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank her for giving me the opportunity to take part in STER. Thank you to Mairéad Minnock who too helped and advised me on certain elements of my dissertation. My heartfelt thanks also to my friends at home and in college for their support, encouragement and understanding throughout this time, it is very much appreciated. To my family, who have supported me through every step of this process, thank you. Your patience, understanding and guidance has not gone unnoticed, I really appreciate all you have helped me with throughout this research process.

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