



IRISH TRAVELLER MOVEMENT



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PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPMENTS IN TRAVELLER EDUCATION POLICY

Positions of the Irish Traveller Movement and the Department of Education and Skills

Reference: Special Education Needs – Presentation to Oireachtas Joint Committee on Jobs, Social Protection and Education on 18th October 2011

Introduction

On the 18th October 2011 the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Jobs, Social Protection and Education debated the issue of special education needs. The debate included a significant focus on recent developments in Traveller education policy. The position of the Department of Education and Skills was presented by Jim Mulkerrins.

Jim Mulkerrins, during the debate, set out the approach being taken by the Department of Education and Skills. Towards the end of the debate he stated that the core point of the Traveller education strategy 'was that they should be resourced and supported on the basis of their need rather than simply on the basis of their identity. That element was negotiated with Travellers and they broadly welcomed it.'

The consensus suggested by Jim Mulkerrins in this comment does not appear to have a strong basis in reality as there appear to be significant differences in the positions of the Irish Traveller Movement and the Department of Education and Skills. The supposed consensus seems to emerge from a shared principle that the trigger for special educational supports for Travellers should be based on the educational needs of children rather than on their identity or ethnic origin. However this supposed consensus

is compromised by very different interpretations of how this principle should be implemented.

First Point of Departure

The core difference in position between the Department of Education and Skills and the Irish Traveller Movement relates to the recognition of Traveller ethnic identity. It is this difference that enables different interpretations of the shared principle.

The Irish Traveller Movement recognises the “distinct ethnic identity” of the Traveller community. It espouses the rights of Traveller children to enjoy their own culture as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Traveller ethnicity is seen as having immediate and practical implications for the provision of education.

Jim Mulkerrins sets out that future educational provision ‘will focus on individual educational need rather than Traveller identity’. He points out that the Department had been ‘questioning whether there would be any value for separate ethnic status for Travellers because they are being treated as a special category group anyway in terms of provision of supports and resources’. He went to say that ‘the Traveller community is fairly evenly split on the question as to whether there would be any value in it’.

The suggestion that Travellers are being treated as ‘a special category group’ would appear to be at odds with the espoused principle that supports should be provided on the basis of the educational needs of the child rather than their identity. The statement that Travellers are fairly evenly split on the issue of ethnic status is at odds with the support for recognition of Traveller ethnicity articulated by all the national Traveller organisations.

The current position of the Department of Education and Skills as articulated by Jim Mulkerrins reflects in effect a return to an understanding of integration that is akin to assimilation rather than the understanding of integration set out in the report of the Task Forces on the Travelling Community. The Task Force emphasized that a ‘recognition of Travellers’ culture and identity has an importance for Travellers and their status in Irish society and that cultural difference therefore is a key element to be taken on board in policy design and in the procedures by which resources are made available’.

Second Point of Departure

The position adopted in relation to Traveller ethnicity influences any analysis and understanding developed as to the causes of Traveller educational disadvantage.

The Irish Traveller Movement has emphasised the need to recognise and acknowledge the failure of the State in providing education for Travellers. Previous practices of segregation and current experiences of refused enrolment and other forms of discrimination, of school bullying and other forms of harassment, of limited recognition of and focus on Traveller ethnicity in the curriculum, and of the inadequate response by many educational establishments to cultural diversity all impact on educational participation and outcomes for Traveller children.

Jim Mulkerrins suggests that the 'biggest issue facing Travellers, aside from school transport and from the historic disadvantage associated with the community, is the general apathy that resides within the community towards education'. He does point to a fear among the 'older generation of Travellers' that 'education may ultimately end many of the cultural aspects of the Traveller lifestyle that they want to retain' but seems to set no store by this. He suggests that a failure to recognise the absolute importance of education for children is 'evidenced in the poor school attendance rates and participation rates of Travellers'.

The Irish Traveller Movement locate the core of the educational issues facing the Traveller community within the education system itself and have proposed actions to address this in areas such as the training of teachers and the monitoring functions of the inspectorate

The Department of Education and Skills locates the core of the educational issues facing the Traveller community within the Traveller community itself. Jim Mulkerrins then goes on to focus on the National Education Welfare Board and efforts 'to ensure that its focus remains firmly fixed on Travellers to ensure that participation rates improve'.

Third Point of Departure

The understanding developed as to the causes of Traveller educational disadvantage will shape the nature of the strategy developed to address the educational needs of the Traveller community.

The Irish Traveller Movement propose a strategy of inclusion of Travellers in mainstream provision and that such a strategy of inclusion would also strive towards the inclusion of Traveller values, culture, history and traditions into educational provision in order to foster respect for cultural difference and a celebration of all cultures. We espouse an intercultural approach to educating Travellers within an education system that respects, recognizes, celebrates and caters for diversity.

An intercultural approach to education is concerned with:

- **Taking action to address the potential for racism and discrimination.**
- **Taking action to respond to the practical implications of cultural diversity.**
- **Taking action to advance equality and achieve an equality of outcomes for all groups.**

These dimensions to the intercultural approach are set out in the report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community which states that an 'intercultural curriculum would need to be based on a number of principles including avoiding racist interpretation in texts, respect for all cultures, information about minority groups in the entire curriculum, a focus on broader equality and human rights issues, and inclusion of the intangible aspects of culture such as values and perspectives'.

Jim Mulkerrins sets out a position that is opposed to the intercultural approach in stating that the 'principle of inclusion is at the core of the current strategy and future provision will focus on the development of more inclusive school practices. Future provision will focus on individual educational need rather than Traveller identity'.

Fourth Point of Departure

The nature of the strategy developed to address the educational needs of the Traveller community will influence the scale and nature of any targeted education supports for the Traveller community. This is the core issue at present given the withdrawal of resource teachers, visiting teachers, and additional teaching hours for Travellers at post primary and the phasing out of the Senior Traveller Training Centres.

The Irish Traveller Movement has emphasised the need for full inclusion of Travellers into mainstream provision. It has highlighted the need to ensure there is no withdrawal of Traveller pupils or segregation and that there is no allocation of special needs supports purely based on ethnic identity. Special needs supports should be provided on a needs basis.

The Irish Traveller Movement has pointed out that, despite improvements, a significant gap pertains between the participation, attainment and outcomes of Traveller learners in comparison to their settled counterparts. It has emphasised the need and continued value of educational initiatives targeted on Travellers to ensure the attainment and educational outcomes of Travellers is brought into line with their settled counterparts. It has stated that the budgetary cuts to Traveller education are short sighted and undermine Travellers' integration and potential future educational and career opportunities.

There is a place for targeted provision within an integration approach that places Travellers within mainstream provision. In such a context targeted provision is limited to three very specific roles to:

- 1. Address the legacy of discrimination and exclusion experienced by the Traveller community that is evidenced in the educational disadvantage of the group.**
- 2. Address any needs that might be specific to the Traveller community due to their cultural difference and in particular due to their nomadic tradition.**
- 3. Address the changes required in mainstream educational institutions to eliminate discrimination, take account of cultural diversity and promote equality effectively.**

Jim Mulkerrins suggests that 'there is little argument supporting having a designated separate support for Traveller children simply because they are Traveller children' and states that 'Traveller children would be counted and supported under the general learning support provisions that are there'. There would appear to be agreement on this between the Irish Traveller Movement and the Department of Education and Skills.

However differences emerge when it comes to the application of this principle. In particular differences emerge due to:

- **A failure by the Department of Education and Skills to take culture and identity into account. The general learning support provisions need to accommodate Travellers as well as those of settled people and in a context of ethnic diversity needs can present differently.**

This is reflected in the comments of Jim Mulkerrins in relation to the withdrawal of the resource teachers for Travellers. He points out that disadvantaged (DEIS) schools ‘had the highest number of Travellers’ and ‘account for approximately 50% of the Travellers’. He notes that ‘as a consequence of that the DEIS allocation and pupil teacher ratio had to be readjusted in order to include the Traveller children’.

However the difference between Travellers and settled people in the presentation of need means that some 50% of Traveller children are outside the boundaries set for this type of provision. He acknowledges this stating that ‘Travellers who attend non-DEIS schools are far more dispersed and we had only a small number of schools with high concentrations or high numbers’. He indicates that further support was limited to this small number of schools.

More generally there is no account of any audit of Traveller needs to ensure that general supports can be provided in a manner that addresses those needs. The Irish Traveller Movement has emphasised the importance of the use of such needs audits.

- **A failure by the Department of Education and Skills to acknowledge the legacy of discrimination and exclusion experienced by the Traveller community and its impact on educational status.**

The Irish Traveller Movement has highlighted the need to acknowledge that the education system has failed Travellers in the past and the importance of investing in teacher training for education in a culturally diverse context

and in the development, dissemination and implementation of good practice models in responding to cultural diversity in mainstream educational institutions. The Irish Traveller Movement has also emphasised the need for targeted initiatives that would bring Traveller educational status up to a par with their settled counterparts.

This issue is exemplified in the withdrawal of additional teaching hours for Travellers at post primary level. The Irish Traveller Movement has pointed to the importance of these supports in enabling a more effective participation by Travellers at post primary level and stated that there is an unquestionable need for specific supports for Travellers in need at post primary level given the education disadvantage experienced by Travellers. No support has replaced this service.

Jim Mulkerrins does not make reference to this particular support. However he does acknowledge that despite successes 'there are still issues largely vocalised through their representative groups that perhaps quantum of support should remain to support what is a historically disadvantaged group'. There would appear to be a shared recognition of this issue but there does not appear to be any intention to address it from a policy or budgetary perspective.

- A failure by the Department of Education and Skills to address the particular challenges to move in a strategic manner from special supports targeted at Traveller children to the inclusion of Traveller children with needs in the general provision of learning supports.

This is exemplified in relation to the withdrawal of visiting teachers for Travellers. The Irish Traveller Movement points to key roles played by the visiting teachers in assisting in enrolment, providing information on educational entitlements, acting as advocates for Traveller children, supporting Travellers to remain in the educational system and providing outreach to marginalised families and to families that were more nomadic.

The Traveller education strategy recommended that the visiting teacher service be reviewed, evaluated and adapted if necessary. No such review appears to have been undertaken. The withdrawal appears to be dictated by the search for savings rather than the need for effective strategies to mainstream Travellers in the educational system in a manner that achieves equality in educational outcomes for them.

Jim Mulkerrins makes no reference to this issue of transition from the current support systems and the need for care in making this transition so that gaps do not emerge and the progress made on foot of previous supports does not get reversed.

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