

Submission by Stephen O'Connor, Organiser, CDETB Educational Service to Prisons, to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community.

According to the 2016 census, 57.2 per cent of male travellers had only primary school education, a figure four times higher than the general population.

Only 13 per cent of Traveller girls completed second level education. For the settled community, the figure is 69 per cent.

Again, 1% of Travellers progressed to third level education and made up just 0.1% of the total student body. These are just some of the stark statistics which tell a story of generational, institutionalised disadvantage, the result of years of failed policies and neglect.

In this short submission, I would like to highlight just one important cause of this lamentable situation, namely the issue of cultural identity and how it acts as a major barrier to the progress of our traveller learners. I would also like give you a short account of how CDETB Educational Service to Prisons, is attempting to address this critical issue.

In 2010, a report by Maria Campbell and Niamh Hourigan identified the depth of prejudice that Travellers encounter daily as a major contributory factor to members of the Travelling Community not realising their potential as learners. They further contended that 'mainstream educational and workplace contexts are dominated by the values, behaviours and authority structures of the settled community.' In other words, for Travellers, school is a construct of the settled community, owing little to their lived experiences and their cultural norms.

Moreover, the lack of job opportunities for travellers removes a compelling motive for pursuing an educational pathway. For, as the report goes on to observe, *Travellers feel, 'an enormous stigma attached to their cultural identity. 20 per cent the Travellers spoken to as part of this study who had participated in the workforce or further education had hidden their Traveller identity from co-workers or fellow students.'*

In response to this, The CDETB Educational Service to Prisons has put in place a number of simple measures which are designed to promote a more culturally responsive environment within our prison education centres. To underpin this work, we have asked a teacher within each centre to become a Traveller Champion and to liaise with and advise Head Teachers in relation to Traveller issues, as well as to identify individual needs and to actively encourage Travellers to attend classes. We have also asked a teacher to lead and coordinate our efforts across the service.

If we are to make a real impact in relation to improved educational outcomes for travellers in our prisons, we must start with ourselves as providers. As has been pointed out to us by the representatives of the Travelling Community and also by academic research on many occasions, those who deliver our services themselves need to engage in training and education, so that they can recognise those cultural barriers which impact on the educational progression of Traveller learners. We must listen to our learners and learn from those who have experienced the reality of

discrimination and inequality at first hand. And we must question our own values and beliefs.

In June 2019, with the support of the Traveller in Prison initiative, 16 CDETB teachers undertook a 2-day Introduction to Equality and Anti-Discrimination **issues** delivered by Maynooth University. The course concentrated on themes such as, prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, values and ideologies of superiority and their role in creating and replicating inequality. The course also looked at the legislative frameworks and key organisations relating to equality in Ireland. Finally, our staff explored the possibilities of addressing inequality as teachers in the prison system. We have also been instrumental in inviting various Traveller organisations into our education centres and we have learned much about what we need to do to further educational progress for our traveller learners.

Through our work with the Traveller in Prison Initiative, we have been active in promoting Traveller culture within our centres. Traveller Pride weeks have included music performances by the legendary Finbar Furey, exhibitions of the traditional art of tin smithing and local exhibitions and displays of art, photography and craft work celebrating Traveller Culture. The purpose of these events is to demonstrate that Traveller culture is valued within our centres. In this respect, we have observed not only an increased level of pride expressed by Traveller learners but an increased interest in Traveller culture among those learners from a settled background.

Within our curriculum too, we are endeavouring to ensure that the unique needs of Travellers are recognised and catered for. In Wheatfield prison for instance, we deliver the **QQI Level Three Module in Challenging Discrimination** to facilitate understanding of bias/prejudice and discrimination towards various sections of society including the Travelling Community.

In addition to this, we use materials that reflect traveller culture in classes. In Cloverhill Prison, for example these range from books for literacy students by Ann Marie Collins to recordings for use in the music class by artists such as Johnny Doran.

During 2020/21 our drama teacher in Arbour Hill and a group of students, including travellers, devised a play based on traveller culture, including use of the Cant/Gammon language in the script.

Literacy work is a key part of our work in the Educational Service to Prisons and a range of approaches is employed in relation to our adult learners including; one-to-one teaching, group work, Toe by Toe, Story book Mums and Dads and the use of an interactive literacy package, developed by our own teachers which combines literacy and numeracy work with the development of digital skills. Again, adult literacy work is integrated in all parts of the curriculum.

In this short presentation, it has been my intention to identify issues relating to cultural identity which act as a barrier to the educational progress of our Traveller learners. It has not been to give the impression that our delivery is perfect or that this work will, in itself create educational equality for travellers.

It is a clear statement that without considerable efforts to recognise the value of Traveller identity in our schools, colleges and centres, reaching the goal of educational equality for all our Traveller citizens will be very difficult indeed.