

STAR Education Pilot Programme

TVG has hosted the NTRIS STAR Education Pilot Programme in Cork City since November 2019. Initially Cork was not one of the assigned STAR locations but due to one project opting out of the Programme a space became available and so TVG took on the education pilot programme 6 months after the rest of the national STAR programmes had started. Our Traveller and Roma Education Workers were hired in January 2020 and began working with the schools and meeting the students and families but this work was stopped short in March 2020, just 2 months in, at the outbreak of Covid 19 and the following lockdown restrictions.

Covid 19

In some ways the extraordinary circumstances of Covid 19 helped to develop working relationships with the schools as our Education Workers were able to keep a connection with the Traveller students and their families by arranging socially distanced meetings near their homes. It became evident very quickly that the remote learning set up to aid online classrooms was not accessible or a realistic option for many of the STAR students. The main issues were, many of the families did not own a laptop or computer, many did not have WIFI except their mobile phones, language barriers of parents meant that some could not always assist their children with schoolwork queries and the appalling overcrowded living conditions of many Traveller and Roma families meant that it was very difficult to find space to listen and learn quietly.

Our STAR education workers were able to relay this information and highlight the challenges and requested hard copies of school work to be printed for the students that required this approach. Without the intervention of the STAR education workers we feel that these students would have fallen through the cracks. Our education workers were also able to source internet dongles, tablets and laptops for families that required this through their participation in STAR. The practical and cultural awareness of the education workers became evident to the schools in many cases and this helped build a good working relationship and understanding between the two in some circumstances.

Once in-school clusters and other Covid 19 interventions were in place our education workers tried to stay in touch with the students. However some schools' Covid 19 policies restricted access to non-school staff during this time. In some cases these restrictions were in place much longer after the lockdown period. One challenge here was that there were different systems in place for different schools and it was hard for the education workers to get a good working consistency across all the schools. The students who were not able to avail of STAR education workers support in school missed out, however work around approaches such as meeting in homework clubs and after school activities were arranged.

After Covid 19 and the more hands-on support work dealing with the digital divide exposed by remote school work, the STAR team were keen to get back into schools to understand the students experience in school and to look at ways to improve education outcomes. However, as there was less clarity from STAR Oversight Committee/Dept Education regarding roles and expectations of day to day work, the experience of education workers was somewhat inconsistent across all the schools in STAR.

Highlights

- The schools that are clearly engaged and are championing the STAR project are seeing significant benefits and development of outcomes of their Roma and Traveller students.
- Schools that have completed RCAT and TCAT have noted better understanding of their students.
- STAR students have had some excellent opportunities to gain more confidence in their own identity and their own abilities through external activities such as writing and designing a

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book with KidsOwn publishing which promoted the lived experience of the Roma and Traveller students today, creating rap songs with Music Generation and arranging visits to UCC, Dail Eireann, Minister of Education Norma Foley.

- It was noted that after Covid 19 lockdowns there was greater retention of Traveller and Roma students in STAR schools than in schools without the project.
- Traveler and Roma students took part in the Youth-led Anti-Racist Summit in Cork and will continue to work towards Cork becoming the first Anti-Racist city in Ireland.
- TVG staff have a better understanding of how the school system works and what many of the barriers impacting Traveller and Roma education can be. We would welcome further input from schools regarding barriers or challenges they find working with Roma and Traveller students, if any. This open back and forth dialogue has been harder to achieve under the current structure and time resources.
- Traveller and Roma families have found a benefit to the additional supports of STAR programme including the role of the designated HSLO and education workers – better communication and interaction with schools has been noted at points.

Challenges

- There are too many schools included in the Pilot programme, education workers are spread too thin across the city with 14 schools included in the pilot. With only 2 education workers and 1 HSLO we feel it lessens the impact of the work. We raised this issue in October and November 2019 at the planning stage of the project but we were told that there needed to be as many schools as possible to have a stronger reach.
- Recruitment and retention of staff is very difficult due to the nature of the short term contracts and the little notice given for contract extensions. After the first 2.5-3 years of the project TVG lost the original team members due to the staff requiring more certainty in their career prospects. Since then contracts have only been able to be offered for 1 year or in some cases less than a year due to the lack of clarity on contract extensions and funding.
- The opt-in/voluntary nature of STAR project means that there is mixed buy-in to the project from schools. Some feel that they have enough supports already, some feel that they don't want to lose any class time for students and it seemed that was not of value for some other stakeholders. This is an obstacle because it reduces the ability to build and develop new working models with the schools. The schools must be key stakeholders who have a strong sense of ownership in the project. We feel that it would be more suitable for STAR to concentrate on a smaller, select group of schools where the principals clearly want the additional support and have time and space to work actively on the project. At times we have felt that some of the school's involvement has been somewhat tokenistic and this may come from a sense of "having" to sign up to STAR rather than wanting to. One school has never worked with STAR despite having signed up to the programme and some have pulled out of the project.
- The Garda Vetting Process for education workers has caused some delay in getting workers into schools. It is a requirement for each education worker to get garda vetting clearance from each individual school, which involves a lot of paperwork and repetition. We are working with the STAR steering group to find work arounds for this as with short contracts and recruiting requirement during school terms we are sometimes delayed in getting our workers into the schools they are supporting.
- Initially STAR was set up with little infrastructure, there was no real guidance on what education workers' day to day role in schools would be and little support in developing working relationships with the school teams. Covid 19 was clearly an obstacle here, impacting the work of the STAR project for over 2 years. While TVG supports the recent

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recruitment of the Coordinator & Project Manager of STAR NTRIS Pilots, we should have had a similar role from the start of the programme.

- Systemic racism and discrimination is clearly an issue in the school system and yet it has been hard to have this named or openly spoken about in the STAR project. One of our Roma Education Workers, a Roma woman herself, noted of the different forms of racism evident in schools and that Traveller students received different and harsher discrimination, or more overt discrimination than Roma students. Both Traveller and Roma students have noted that their culture and identity is not celebrated or recognised in the same way as the other cultures and races that make up the multicultural classrooms of Ireland today. Both Traveller and Roma students and their families have noted the ongoing low expectations from teachers towards their education outcomes. TCAT and RCAT has been offered to all schools in the STAR programme but sadly there has been very low uptake of this training in the schools.
- Education Workers have noted some more difficult or strained interactions with schools staff at points. Some school staff feel that STAR workers should be part of managing the discipline and behavioural issues of students, others seem ambivalent to the STAR project.
- There is an unequal power dynamic at play, and Traveller and Roma staff in particular have noted a sense of intimidation from their own experiences of schools in the past when they work in schools. There can be a sense of nervousness when going into schools for some workers which can impact the work. Supports for education workers, particular those from Traveller and Roma communities need to be in place to ensure they settle well into the school dynamic.
- It is unclear how to raise complaint or concern of issues of discrimination in schools, more guidance on this would be welcome.