

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM SHAINCHEISTEANNA RÍTHÁBHACHTACHA A THÉANN I GCION AR AN LUCHT SIÚIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COM- MUNITY

Dé Máirt, 19 Samhain 2019

Tuesday, 19 November 2019

The Joint Committee met at 11 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Marcella Corcoran Kennedy,	Lynn Ruane.
Gino Kenny,	
Éamon Ó Cuív.	

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Pippa Hackett.

Seanadóir / Senator Colette Kelleher sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputies Brophy, Joan Collins and O’Loughlin and Senators Coffey and Warfield.

Senator Lynn Ruane: Senator Warfield is running late, but he will be here.

Chairman: He is running late. We need to look at the timing of meetings of the joint committee. There are a couple of options, but I want to discuss the issue later with committee members. I propose that we go into private session to deal with some housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 11.10 a.m. and resumed in public session at 11.25 a.m.

Traveller Education: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: I welcome the members of the joint committee and those viewing our proceedings on Oireachtas TV. The purpose of the meeting is to continue our deliberations on the topic of the impact of education on the Traveller community. We have had one meeting on this topic and two more are scheduled after today. It may be worth making some observations and mentioning some facts as a way of framing our conversation. As an opening reflection, I emphasise that education is a key issue for Travellers and that Travellers value education greatly. As the delegates point out in their submission - I apologise for stealing their words - it is a “real misconception” to think otherwise. Travellers experience significant barriers at all levels as they seek to access education. Schools can be a very cold place for them. Even though people can start out with great enthusiasm, it is often the case that their experience when they land in school is not conducive to flourishing in that space.

Traveller history and culture are still not reflected in the school curriculum. The massive cuts to Traveller education services made in the 2000s have not yet been restored or reversed. Traveller children are more likely to have timetables with reduced hours. This issue has been examined in great detail by the Joint Committee on Education and Skills. It is sobering and arresting for this committee to think about the fact that just 80% of Travellers transfer from primary to secondary school. Traveller children are 50 times more likely than children from the general population to leave school without completing the leaving certificate examinations. Just 13% of female Travellers are educated to upper secondary level, as opposed to 69% of the general population. According to the last census, just 167 Travellers have a third level qualification. As a consequence, the unemployment rate among Travellers is 80%. I am sure all of the statistics I have mentioned will be discussed again.

I welcome Ms Shreya Chaturvedi, a development worker with the Yellow Flag programme. She is accompanied by Mr. Bernard Joyce, the director of the Irish Traveller Movement; Mr. Oein de Bhairdúin, with whom I had the pleasure of working closely for a full year and who is incredibly helpful in the proceedings and the work that is ongoing in the Oireachtas on Travellers’ rights and issues; and Mr. Martin Collins from Pavee Point. They are extremely welcome.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. They are directed that only evi-

dence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I also advise that any submission or opening statement made to the committee will be published on its website after the meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make her or him identifiable.

I remind everyone in attendance that his or her mobile phone is to be turned off because mobile phone can still interfere with the recording system, even when left in silent mode.

I want to welcome some people who are in the Visitors Gallery. We have Irene Hughes from St. Mary's, Edenderry, Lauren Cotter from Loretto College, St. Stephen's Green, Teng Fei Wang from Ballinteer Community College, Laragh Phillips, Coláiste na hInse, Bettystown, County Meath and Daniel Philpott Vendrells, Presentation Brothers, Cork city. I extend a particular welcome to them all and I say "hello" to the fellow Cork person in the room. I do not live too far away from the school, so I will be able to spot him on the hill now.

I invite Ms Chaturvedi to make her opening statement.

Ms Shreya Chaturvedi: I thank committee members for the opportunity to address them today on education. My input is as a development worker of the Yellow Flag programme. I am joined by Mr. Bernard Joyce, director of the Irish Traveller Movement. The Yellow Flag programme is an innovative whole-school initiative which supports schools to celebrate diversity, promote inclusion and challenge racism.

Pioneered initially by the Irish Traveller Movement as an intercultural innovative solution to address poor educational experiences and outcomes for Travellers, it took account of similar exclusion and marginalisation faced by other ethnic minorities and created a programme to encompass children from both majority and minority backgrounds, including Travellers. The programme is goal-centred and accreditation focused under which schools are obliged to meet targets over a comprehensive eight-step strategy. It is not an optional soft-choice programme but one that requires change to be monitored and visible both in the student population and among the staff and the community.

The Yellow Flag programme recognises the risk factors and the potential for Travellers and other ethnic minority children to experience disconnection and insecurity within schools and so the whole-school approach is vital to fostering positive identity among all pupils. However, even with efforts towards Yellow Flag accreditation, school bias and discrimination towards Travellers is so ingrained that in addressing racism among diverse groups, often teachers and school management are blind to the experience of Travellers and their and the school's unconscious bias. Factors such as identity-based exclusion, historical prejudice, conscious and unconscious bias, absence of Travellers in teaching and school management, institutional racism and poor awareness and knowledge of Traveller culture within teaching practice all have a detrimental effect on the educational progression and learning of young Travellers, and on their sense of identity and self-belief.

The National Traveller Survey 2017 revealed that four out of ten Travellers said they or their children were bullied in school. In 2017 the Department of Justice and Equality commissioned

an ESRI report, A Social Portrait of Travellers, which found Travellers are more than 50 times more likely to leave school without the leaving certificate in comparison to the non-Traveller population. Even within Yellow Flag schools, racism towards Travellers dramatically increases in post-primary settings and it is not uncommon to find examples of Traveller students who are actively involved in the Yellow Flag primary schools who dropped out after their transition to a secondary school that was not involved in the programme.

Since 2009 the Yellow Flag programme has worked with 87 schools, 61 families and 26 post-primary schools. That is a significant number given the limited resources available to the programme. The programme has reached 33,535 students and more than 2,600 teachers, yet 53% of the pupils who took part in the intercultural surveys in 2009 as part of the programme recorded that they had witnessed racist comments or behaviours towards others in their school. That is the reason the following recommendations are very important. In order to be able to strengthen and secure the long-term impact it can have on the Irish education system, the Yellow Flag programme needs to be mainstreamed across all primary and secondary schools. In addition to addressing the demand that already exists, it is imperative to reach out to schools with very few or no Traveller students as well. To really impact Traveller participation, retention and progression in the education system it would be valuable to introduce a Yellow Flag model for preschool and third level settings as well. As part of the continuing professional development, CPD, for teaching staff, anti-racist and intercultural training should be mandatory to actively inform the school staff to be mindful of their behaviour towards students from minority ethnic groups, especially Travellers. Strong legislation towards a national anti-racism policy for schools is essential to encourage the Traveller community to remain in school and, therefore, reduce barriers to accessing second and third level education. Clear links with the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs would be critical in achieving a long-term impact. However, to date, no concrete connection has been established despite their efforts. I am happy to answer any questions members might have.

Chairman: I thank Ms Chaturvedi. There will be questions as soon as we have heard all the other presentations. I invite Mr. de Bhairdúin to make his opening statement.

Mr. Oein de Bhairdúin: I thank the committee for the opportunity to attend. When people speak of Travellers, it is my experience that we as Travellers are rarely the ones who are speaking and, ever rarer, the ones who are heard.

I am currently manage St. Oliver's education centre, Cloverhill. We mainly engage with adults over the age of 18. Those who engage with the centre are predominantly from the Traveller community. Many of the newer students were young when draconian cuts were made to Traveller-specific resources in 2011 and 2012. That was when the visiting teachers service for Travellers was disbanded, resource teachers for Travellers were no longer deployed, cuts to the 1.5 additional teacher hours were made, and all senior Traveller training centres were closed, without a suitable alternative. The continued effects of the cuts, compounded by low expectations and the system being either disinterested in or having difficulty in engaging with Travellers, owing to a very settled narrative, continue to be reflected daily in the lives of young people.

At this stage, the committee will be very well aware of the statistics surrounding Travellers in general as well as those on education, but I will repeat them because, while they are numbers, they are also reflective of people's lives. According to the CSO 2016 census, just 13.3% of Traveller females have an upper second level education. Nearly six in every ten Traveller males were educated to primary level at the very most, and only 167 Travellers have a third level qualification. According to the ERSI's report, A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland,

dated 2017, Travellers are 50 times more likely to leave school without the leaving certificate and only 9% of those aged between 25 and 34 have completed second level education.

There exists a very real misconception within the wider community that Travellers do not value education. This is not true. There exists among all people a desire to prosper, grow and learn, and the doorways created by education are greatly valued and desired by Travellers. However, many of these doorways are locked to us. They can be locked by the under-provision of accommodation, the consequences of poverty, when education strategies just remain strategies, and when they, the doorways, are not even considered to be for us. Sometimes when they are open, they have been opened by those who may know very little about us, or a lot about us that is erroneous.

Currently, there are programmes in place in regard to third level education for Travellers. These are much needed and very warmly welcomed but they will be little more than bandages on deep wounds when the vast majority of Travellers do not finish second level. The majority of Travellers who leave the education system early leave at second level. Additional strategies and programmes are needed at this level to support retention and completion. We also need to be more aware of intersectionality within the community and create robust programmes that include and support it. Currently, the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy has only one action in regard to disabilities, action 12, which seeks to facilitate children at preschool level. The ESRI report states, by way of age comparison, that 10% of Travellers have a learning disability, 13% experience mobility limitations and 11% have difficulty in getting to school or work due to a long-term condition or disability. Consideration of this intersectionality is essential if we are to make progress.

A very real and bright blessing in my life has been my involvement in regard to the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill, a Bill that seeks to be part of a process of ensuring schools are safer places for Traveller children, a process in which our identities will not be denied, reduced or removed, and a process in which all children and young people learn about who we really are, not only as an attempt to remove the biases and suspicions we live with but also to reflect a very real, truer Ireland.

Since 2001, the NCCA has made recommendations to include Traveller culture and history in the curriculum but, in conjunction with a recent NCCA audit, it was proven that these recommendations have largely failed, with only two optional modules in the senior cycle being directly inclusive of Travellers. I understand that the Minister of Education and Skills remains very open to the process and I feel we must step away from the charity of potentially being included to an assurance that we will be. Sadly, time has shown that when Travellers are a choice, they are just not chosen. To do other than what I propose places a great weight of responsibility for the education of students, teachers and the institutions on the shoulders of children.

We need to ensure that intercultural awareness training is mandatory for teachers, regardless of who they are teaching, as there is a wide array of opinions and practices, deliberate or unconscious, that can be devastating to the young. Education should be in a place of safety, it should be aware, and it should be accessible and for all. Programmes help and projects can bring some opportunities for progression but without an authentic structural change, we will be forever an add-on. Our children and yours deserve much better than that.

Chairman: I invite Mr. Martin Collins from Pavee Point to make the opening statement.

Mr. Martin Collins: I will be extremely brief. We have provided our submission and as the

Chairman said, the committee has already had one hearing on the issue of Travellers and education. Also, I am reminded that I and many others were in this building twice this year already speaking about Travellers and the challenges in respect of education. Some reports have come from that, one on progression from primary to second level. I believe there is a second report on the issue of reduced timetables, but I am open to correction on that, so people are well versed on the issues and the challenges facing Travellers in the education system. Nonetheless, we welcome once again this opportunity to address the joint committee on some of the challenges and, potentially, some of the solutions.

The Chairman made an opening comment about misconceptions. It is also a misconception to say that Travellers drop out of education. It is more a question of being pushed out of education when we have a system that is monocultural, that only reflects a majority perspective and culture, where there is no positive reinforcement or visibility of Traveller culture and Traveller identity, and where we have racism and discrimination. As we all know, the school yard and the classroom can be a microcosm of the wider society. All those issues are major factors in terms of Travellers not being able to access, participate in and get decent outcomes in terms of educational attainment. I prefer to use the term “pushed out” rather than “dropped out”. That was certainly my experience having attended primary school many years ago.

I will focus on some of the recommendations we see as being key but before doing that I will make a more general point. We are living in very difficult and challenging times in Ireland in terms of human rights and equality across the board, not just for Travellers. There is no doubt that we have seen an increase in right-wing rhetoric and populism. I remind the members that we cannot be complacent about that. We need to be vigilant and we need strong political leadership in addressing racism and the rise of the right in Ireland.

In light of that, we welcome the recent consultative process in respect of hate speech and hate crime that the Department of Justice and Equality is carrying out. We all know that racism and discrimination can happen at many levels. It can happen at the individual level and also at the institutional level. We see the negative impacts of that in every aspect of Travellers’ lives. This is clearly evident in the area of education, from what Mr. De Bhairdúin and the Chairman said in terms of the statistics, which I will not repeat.

I am also reminded of the first Hispanic judge in the United States Supreme Court. Her name is Sonia Sotomayor. She once said that unless we get equality in education, we will not have an equal society. The educational system, in my opinion, perpetuates that inequality.

A recent UNICEF report stated that Traveller children are still falling between the cracks, with the vast majority of Traveller children ceasing education before their junior certificate examination.

In terms of the recommendations, we are all well versed on the statistics. The challenge is to create a more inclusive learning context that promotes respect for diversity and interculturalism and that addresses racism at all its levels and in all its guises. One way of achieving that is through the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill, which we welcome. We hope that Bill will be adopted and fully implemented, thereby ensuring Travellers will have positive reinforcement of their identity within the school curriculum.

We also need to deal with the culture of low expectations that many teachers and principals have in respect of Travellers. When that continues, it limits Travellers achieving their full potential and goals in life.

We want to see the re-establishment of the Traveller education advisory forum. Traveller organisations have no real way of feeding into the development and implementation of education policy. We want to see the re-establishment of that consultative forum, which was disbanded in 2016. We want to see the development of a new Traveller education strategy. What we have is piecemeal. There is a sub-committee of the national Traveller and Roma inclusion steering group, NTRIS, but we do not have a clear strategy or policy for or on Traveller education. We want to see the restoration of the savage cuts made to the Traveller education budget, to the tune of 85%, imposed during the austerity period.

As I said in this room previously, we cannot deal with Traveller education in isolation from other issues. There is an interdependence in terms of access to secure, adequate and high quality accommodation, employment and healthcare and in addressing entrenched and institutionalised racism. We need a multifaceted, multi-agency, co-ordinated and structured approach to address these issues. Addressing one in isolation from the others is doomed to failure.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I thank the delegates for their presentations. I will ask some general questions and whoever wishes to respond can do so. The questions do not target a particular contribution.

The education system has not owned up to the way it treats Travellers. I have far too many heated debates with teachers about the culture of low expectations. It is very much a case of “but...” It is believed teachers are well meaning, but somehow the fact is ignored that they do not spend time in empowering a young Traveller child and going on a journey with them or his or her family. I would welcome comments on the low expectations for Traveller children, something I have experienced. Travellers are ostracised, even within my community. They feel the low level of expectations even more than I do. What impact does this have on the Traveller community? How do we address the issue? The Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill is one measure, but the psyche of teachers and school principals has not allowed them to acknowledge that that is the way they treat Traveller children. How can we even begin to make sure we change that culture if they are not even willing to stand up and accept that this is what they create in the classroom? At second level, in particular, there is a culture of ignoring Traveller children to the point where they just move away. It almost seems to be the approach taken by teachers to push children out of the system, as Mr. Collins said, and make life a little easier for them in the classroom in not having to acknowledge their own bias. What can we do to get people to take ownership of the issue of their low expectations for the Traveller community? Are there positive examples to which to point in Ireland where schools are getting it right? Is there any school that comes to mind where what it is doing is good? Is there even one positive example that we could look to expand? The Yellow Flag programme will be launched in schools. Have the delegates come across a school that they can say has created the right environment for Traveller children?

How do we begin to support families to advocate for their children in the education system? I refer to a child who had a negative experience of the school system as a Traveller and is going back as a parent. As he or she never felt he or she had been heard as a student, why would he or she be heard as a parent? How can we support parents to advocate for their children in a system that can be cruel and cold?

The Joint Committee on Education and Skills asked Mr. Collins to come before it. It was done at the very last minute, but the committee was looking at the question of digital competency. If Traveller children are already falling way behind and being pushed out of the education system, what will it mean in the context of how quickly we are moving in acquiring digital

competencies and skills - digital literacy - within the workforce? Are there programmes within the education system aimed at young Traveller children to enable them to acquire digital literacy skills? I am particularly concerned about class bias in algorithms and how people are being kept out of employment or the education system just because of their surname or address. This will have a considerable impact on the Traveller community. I am just wondering whether anything is being done regarding digital literacy among Traveller students?

Chairman: I thank Senator Ruane. There were questions on challenging the culture of low expectations in the education system. Are there examples of good practice or is there a positive example of a school that is inclusive and supportive of parents? Questions were asked about digital competency and literacy and about how a divide is opening up.

Mr. Martin Collins: On a more positive note, I acknowledge what is generally regarded as a model of good practice, namely, the rolling out of the four education pilot schemes, in Dublin, Cork, Wexford and Galway. There is a multidisciplinary team involved consisting of Travellers, an education welfare officer and a home-school liaison official. The pilots are for two years and are funded by the Department of Justice and Equality, Tusla and the Department of Education and Skills. That must be acknowledged. The aim of the pilots is to support Traveller access, participation and progression throughout the education system. Part of the team's remit will be to work with Traveller parents and to advocate for and empower them to develop the confidence and skill set to engage with school staff, including the principal, to ensure the best interest of their children is being met. There is a national oversight committee for that. It includes Traveller organisations. The programme will be reviewed and documented. If it proves to be effective, it should be expanded to other parts of the country. That is a positive development that I wish to acknowledge.

There is a commitment in the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy to develop an affirmative action programme that would give Travellers the opportunity to gain access to teacher training colleges to become teachers. That is really important because the only way one can develop trust and confidence in any institution is when one sees one's own face reflected back when one looks at it. The same principle applies to the Garda and other institutions. That is probably the most effective way, albeit not the only way, of developing trust and confidence among Travellers in the education system. It is when they see their own faces in the system as teachers and principals. That is where we really need to be heading. We need to be very ambitious, not timid. We need to make it happen. All of us, through the strategy, are advocating strongly in this regard.

Chairman: Would anybody else like to respond?

Mr. Oein de Bhairdúin: I would. I also wish to comment on the support for the pilot programmes we are running. They are very much needed. I hope they will be very successful but they are not immune from criticism. In one way, they are supporting a process that should already be happening and supported by the State in general. We are putting much-needed resources into them and I hope they will be successful.

We must ask about how we are challenging existing structures. Are we creating another avenue for people to prosper without actually challenging the core? We must educate teachers who are already in our institutions; otherwise we are creating something that does not need to be there.

I was part of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's audit of best practice in

schools across the country. We genuinely struggled. We came across cases where schools were doing quite well because of teachers or principals who were doing their best, but the work was based on the personality and individual interventions of the teachers and principals rather than on a structure based on the Traveller children engaging daily. In itself, this resulted in hesitation. A model based on a very limited number of people, who could potentially move on, could be pushed as best practice rather than ensuring support structures are maintained. On the need for ongoing audits, I am aware that when schools undergo their own audits, they will look to ensure the inclusion of Travellers within the curriculum. This also needs to be done in a way that audits and reviews of schools look at how they present the language and tuition on Travellers in a normative way, and that the Traveller community itself can be part of that process. If one asks schools if they are doing well in that regard, the chances are that they will respond that they are. We need to have our voices at that table as a counter narrative to show if there are gaps developing, perhaps in a very authentic way, and then we can highlight them.

Ms Shreya Chaturvedi: As part of the Yellow Flag programme, all schools in the programme are required to go through diversity and equality training. This includes all teachers and staff in the schools. This gives them the opportunity to discuss relevant and sometimes controversial issues they are not able to talk about within the daily routine of the school.

Up to now we have reached approximately 2,563 school staff through this training. In October 2018, we conducted an independent evaluation, results of which show that 70% of the schools said their staff had a better understanding of racism, 72% said their staff had a better understanding of cultural diversity and 63% said their staff had the opportunity to discuss and raise relevant issues. These are positive findings considering the limited scale as we are only able to provide two hours of training to every school that we go to. This is not even enough time to go deep into the relevant issues. Given this limitation, these are positive findings.

We have also developed an additional digital training course, which is the Yellow Flag self-awareness training, through which we encourage teachers, other school staff and parents to do in groups. This helps to explore hidden biases and how people can make sure it does not affect their delivery in the classroom. The fourth step of the programme requires an intercultural survey to be done by all students and parents of the school. In a lot of those surveys, many statistics and open-ended answers come out, which make the teachers realise they are probably not thinking about the issue enough. They are supposed to develop an action plan based on that, which makes sure they are addressing each and everything that comes up in the intercultural survey. Even then, as I said earlier, the bias is so ingrained that as a development worker - and many more people before me - I have had to point out certain issues that are particular to the treatment of Travellers. We have to make sure the issues are pointed out and that they do something about it. We are happy to provide the committee with many good examples in schools, especially primary schools, that have included Travellers extremely well. They have made meaningful connections with the children's parents and with community organisations. This is an example of good practice and we would be very happy to provide the committee with the names of those schools.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I believe that schools are a microcosm of society but moving beyond the school walls, the Yellow Flag programme - and the 33,000 young people going through it - is in itself an example of changes in mindsets and attitudes, and it acknowledges the difference in society while recognising the uniqueness of each and every child within the school walls. That, however, is not enough. Going beyond that it must change the teachers who teach. They are the role models within the schools in the classrooms. If they come with certain views and

preconceived ideas it can have a significant knock-on effect on young people's expectations and achievements.

As of 2 November, the Irish Traveller Movement is developing what is probably the first national strategy for young Travellers. It is about looking at their needs. We want to hear their voices. As recently as this month, there was a discussion involving young Travellers in County Offaly whose ages ranged from 14 to 21 years. They raised a number of issues.

Chairman: Perhaps Mr. Joyce might share the details.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: Yes. One of the issues was identity bullying, with young people reporting physical and verbal abuse. Another was that of low expectations, with reports of teachers putting Travellers at the back of classrooms. We are not talking about 20 years ago but now. Young Travellers raised the issue of teachers not valuing them as much as their settled peers and using them for sports instead of academia. They need more support and information in school, for example, assistance with grant applications and the cost of same. Despite the talk about supporting people in education, we are not giving young people that support.

On incomes, Mr. Collins alluded to how the Traveller economy was in decline. As such, there is a need to increase the value of education within the community. Although young people are being pushed out of school, there are a number of other factors involved in early school leaving. For example, young people might not like school, they are being bullied, they feel silly about not having literacy skills or they are not in a comfortable space, in the sense that other young people are leaving them out. Another factor is their culture is not seen in the classroom or school. These factors were even evident when I was going to school in the 1980s. They are intergenerational issues which continue the cycle.

If people want to see something being done, the Yellow Flag programme is an example of an initiative, but we need to see a strong policy approach being taken to address the underlying issues. A national education strategy is required to put in place what is needed to address some of the issues within the community.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Joyce. Mr. Collins wishes to contribute, after whom I will call Deputy Corcoran Kennedy to ask her questions.

Mr. Martin Collins: Many Traveller organisations, including those represented, have during the years undertaken initiatives and projects to engage with the school community, for example, organising human rights days and intercultural days. All of the Traveller organisations are doing this work on a shoestring budget. We are not supported or resourced to do it, which means that there are significant constraints. Traveller organisations need to be supported financially to develop this work.

A fundamental point must be made. We have played our part and will continue to do so, but Traveller organisations are not a substitute for the State. What we do does not absolve it of its responsibilities in ensuring Travellers have access and progress at all levels of the education system. We need to move away from what might be called ad hocery to a more structured, institutionalised policy response from the State on the issue of Traveller access to education. That is why there is a clear need for the development and implementation of a Traveller education strategy and for that strategy to be developed in partnership with Traveller organisations. We need to see the re-establishment of the national Traveller advisory consultative forum. We need a process in which we can engage in constructive dialogue with the policymakers in the

Department of Education and Skills and other relevant stakeholders.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: I thank all the witnesses for their presentations this morning. I wanted to ask the representatives from the Yellow Flag programme if it has had any engagement with the National Centre for Curriculum and Assessment in relation to Yellow Flag's proposal for main-streaming Yellow Flag experiences in the schools. The other question I had was in relation to whether Yellow Flag has engaged with the Irish association for career guidance. It strikes me that the association is the touch point for youngsters when they are in school and it might be worth informing and educating the association if Yellow Flag has not done so already.

On the funding that was cut in the recession, how much of that has been restored or is it that it is piecemeal, in that it must be sourced from different areas rather than one particular funding stream?

Chairman: Who would like to respond to that? Yellow Flag was asked about the National Centre for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, and the restoration, if any, of funding cuts.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: I will start with the Yellow Flag programme. Our closest dealings with the NCCA have been when we sat on the audit committee looking at current practice that would feed into the Minister with regard to the Private Members' Bill on Traveller inclusion in history in the curriculum, the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018. There was a discussion on the NCCA being somewhat reliant on looking at what is currently available out there and there was nothing. The only route the NCCA could take was through the Yellow Flag programme in terms of the diversity and inclusion programme and we fed that into the audit that was carried out. I understand it is currently with the Minister.

The second question relates to the cuts. Interestingly, at one stage there was, in fact, a national Traveller education strategy but the only major implementation of that was the cuts within it, which were significant. As far as I am aware, there has not been any significant restoration of those cuts, which were up to 85%. I am not aware that there has been any restoration besides, perhaps, the action under the national Traveller and Roma inclusion strategy, NTRIS, around the pilot programmes.

Chairman: That is where the visitor teaching scheme went, and well as the resource teachers.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: Yes.

Chairman: Have those cuts have not been reversed to date?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: No.

Chairman: Does anybody else want to respond to Deputy Corcoran Kennedy?

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: I asked how was the engagement with the career guidance association. For example, if one is looking at encouraging children to go into primary teaching or second level teaching, perhaps if the career guidance teachers saw this as a pathway for the youngsters, it would be good to connect with them. I was wondering whether the witnesses had done that.

Mr. Martin Collins: Not in any in-depth way, again because we do not have the resources or the staff to do the work. We had an education programme up until a year and a half ago. It

was funded by an independent trust for three years. We had three staff on that education programme and they engaged quite extensively with the stakeholders in this arena. When we had that programme, we had a lot of in-service training in St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra - the teacher training college. Some of the people concerned may have been career guidance counsellors but I am open to correction on that. My overall point is we do not have the capacity. It is as simple as that. We do not have the resources or the staff to do what we would like to do. That is the bottom line.

Chairman: I ask for leadership from the State, which is the point that Mr. Collins is making. Mr. Collins will play his part but he cannot carry the whole responsibility.

Mr. Oein de Bhairdúin: I know that people have been engaging directly via the Youthreach programme. In May, an audit of the Youthreach system discovered that one in six participants is a Traveller. This equates to more than 2,000 people. I suggest that people should read the audit. The intentions were there. The language was from a cultural deficit model. It explained the reasons people are not progressing. It suggested that Travellers have a disinterest, get married early or are not looking for jobs. There can be a misplacement of issues when they are portrayed as barriers that people are unable to overcome, because they become the responsibility of the student rather than the structure. Although the issues were identified quite well, there was no real sense of what is being put in place to overcome them. Travellers engage with structural services, but it usually happens through the system only.

Chairman: Deputy Ó Cuív would like to ask some questions.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It seems to me that we need to turn a vicious circle into a virtuous circle. One of the challenges we face as we seek to get people to engage with education generally is that some people do not see education as having any benefit for themselves. We all know people who ask what the point of learning Irish or Latin is, because nobody speaks those languages. They do not see the point of learning all sorts of things. Other people believe that all education is good because they see results around them in their own communities. It seems to me that we keep coming around with this circular challenge. Our failure to get people from the Traveller community into professions, because of all the barriers we have placed in their way, is creating a challenge for the next generation. If people are able to look up to a level of previous success when they see members of their own families who managed to get through the education system and do well out of it, they will see that they can get the advantages from education that the rest of society can get from it.

I would like to mention a classic example that really brought this home to me. Some of those present will know Dr. Micheál MacGréil, who did a huge sociological study that included a chapter on the status of Irish-language speakers in society, as opposed to the status of the Irish language. It also included a chapter on the status of Travellers in society. Unfortunately, Travellers were at the very lowest level in terms of the way the rest of society perceived them and Irish speakers were right up at the top. I remind those who might respond to this finding by saying "that is the way it is" that 100 or 150 years ago, Irish speakers were out on the margins - where the language survived - as poor fishermen and farmers with the poorest land. When I started to think about this matter, it struck me that this change was brought about by various forms of State support. It is interesting to recall that because the new State wanted Irish-language teachers, it put many people from very disadvantaged backgrounds through the training colleges because they had the one thing the State was looking for - the Irish language. As a result, everyone in these communities had a relative who became a teacher. Many of them moved into other things. I started to think about social engineering as I looked at Dr. MacGréil's

sociological study and reflected on how these groups have diverged over 120 years. I remind the committee that his study is dedicated to the Traveller community and refers to apartheid in Ireland. When he talks about apartheid, he is not talking about Travellers - he is talking about the settled community's attitude to Travellers. We will have a huge challenge when we reach the next module, which relates to employment. None of us wants to do things from which there are no results. When people train for football teams, they want to win matches. When people do things, they want to see results. One of the challenges we face is that when Travellers get education, they find it more difficult than settled people to get employment. This means the results of education are not as immediately obvious. Leaving the Traveller Community aside, I look across at communities that may have 70% going to third level education and other communities that have 20% going to third level education. One asks why that is so given that they have teachers with the same qualifications and so on. It seems to come back to the expectation issue. For example, in some rural communities very few of the parents went to third level education even though some other relatives may have. They still seem to get an extraordinarily high level of participation. Many people living very far away from the third level institutions go to third level education while some people in areas close to the M50 get low levels of participation. Here we get into issues of expectation and peer pressure from other students. In one the peer pressure seems to be to get on in school as that is the way forward. We might not have given sufficient attention to addressing this major challenge.

How can we create the expectation within the education system that people can reach for the stars and get there? In reality they can become doctors, teachers, top scientist or anything else they want to be. There should be no psychological barrier to getting there, but it seems to be there if we look at this realistically.

Chairman: Perhaps the witnesses might respond to those questions about social engineering and expectations.

Mr. Martin Collins: As Deputy Ó Cuív was speaking, I was reminded of how it becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy. This culture of low expectations has to a degree been internalised certainly by a significant number of Travellers who feel not good enough, that education is not for them, or that they cannot become a garda or a doctor. That is gradually eroding thankfully. Much of that low expectation of oneself has been internalised, which is not totally surprising after decades if not centuries of oppression and negative messaging, sometimes in very explicit ways and sometimes in very implicit ways that someone is not good enough. When picking up that message from cradle to grave, some people internalise it. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy and it becomes intergenerational with people passing it on to their children leading to a vicious cycle. The challenge is breaking that culture of low expectation within the system, in the institutions, in the schools and in the community.

The people best placed to break that internalised inferiority complex are Traveller organisations. We do a lot of work on cultural identity, self-esteem and confidence. However, we need the funding and resources to do that important work, to instil pride, confidence and a sense of belief that they can accomplish. We have seen it with other ethnic groups in other parts of the globe. I travel quite a bit in Europe. I see it in Spain and in Georgia with Roma and other indigenous groups where they have succeeded. I am not saying everything is perfect or a panacea, but they have certainly made much more progress than we have.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: On the internalised element within the community, I am not sure if people really understand the psychological damage that is happening to our young people. This case study might give some depth to that. It is a follow-on to the Deputy's question and to what

Mr. Collins said. I will quote from a 16 year old in post primary school in 2009:

I love music and art. I want to be a musician and a model. I'm really scared to tell my class that I'm a Traveller and have anxiety about this. Most of my class have said that they are already racist and that their parents do not like us Travellers living in their area. Some of my class call us "knackers" and most of the rest nod in agreement. I am the only Traveller in the class, but I don't want to tell my teacher as it could make the situation worse.

That is a case study and many Travellers do not feel that they can disclose their identity. They do not feel confident because of the level of prejudice and discrimination they experience. When they are in a classroom where racism comes in from the community and they are surrounded by that, how are they to have that pride in their identity? It is very challenging. That is one in a third level institution. There is another one probably from a primary school. It is also important. It is from a seven year old who says that she cannot be herself in school. Our education system is not inclusive and is not welcoming. Being a Traveller is nearly a resistance in itself. We need to ensure that initiatives such as the Private Members' Bill on Traveller culture and history are included. We need to look at initiatives such as the Yellow Flag programme and initiatives that are working day to day trying to bring about the changes that are necessary.

There is an onus on the State to take on the responsibility and show leadership to ensure that what is happening to our young people now is addressed because it is absolutely unacceptable. We all have a responsibility to ensure that action is taken.

Deputy Gino Kenny: My main question was for Mr. Collins but he has left now. Mr. Joyce might be able to answer a question about the pilot project in four counties, which sounds quite positive. I ask him to drill down through the details. Where does it start? Where does it finish? What are the anticipated outcomes? What age groups are involved?

I have a further question for Mr. de Bhairdúin and Ms Chaturvedi. This question might sound a bit odd. Twenty years ago, were Travellers in a better position educationally than they are now? All the cutbacks made in 2008 and 2009 had a detrimental effect on Traveller educational outcomes, but I want to consider ten years prior to that. I think I know the answer, but I would be interested to hear the witnesses' opinions.

Chairman: The first question was on the pilot and the second asked if we are going backwards or forwards.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: We might have different opinions on that. We are in a more regressive position now than we were when the visiting teacher service was in place and when there were links with the schools and the parents. There was an increase in children transferring over to post-primary education and it went up to 90% or 95%. When the cuts came in they cut the specific educational supports directly to Travellers, which was criminal. It was morally wrong to do that at a time Travellers were starting to catch up. It shows that the most marginalised and most excluded groups were the most affected by the cuts. Travellers were particularly impacted when the social inclusion budget was cut and we have not yet got back to where we were more than 15 years ago. Going back further, 20 years ago and more, I can personally attest that there were many Travellers in segregated schools. It is good that they are no longer *in situ*, because they reflected a dark past in terms of how society treated Travellers. Those institutional schools did not offer the intermediate or leaving certificate and there was no expectation that Traveller children would go further and do better things. That issue probably deserves a hearing in its own right in terms of how Travellers were treated by the State.

The pilot programmes are a welcome new initiative. The idea is that they will be very much based within the community, as part of which a number of Travellers will be employed and will link in with some of the education bodies. They will look at issues like skills attainment and some of the challenges Traveller children face in schools. The proposal is for a well resourced model, with a team linking in with Tusla and the Department of Education and Skills. The initiative is welcome, but we have yet to see how it will be fully rolled out.

Chairman: The departmental officials who are responsible for the initiative are due to attend a future meeting of the committee, which will afford us an opportunity to discuss it.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: That would be helpful. We are seeing developments in Dublin, Tuam and possibly Cork and Wexford. The committee should note that the programmes are aimed at both Travellers and members of the Roma community. It certainly is a welcome initiative.

Mr. Oein de Bhairdúin: The situation in education has regressed. I was one of the children who was supported 15 years ago to progress to higher education. Five years before that, there was more of a barrier in place. When I was going through the system, there were structures in place which, although not perfect, were well funded. We had centres, teachers and teaching hours set aside for this purpose. The resources could have been better deployed but at least they were in place. Since the cuts were imposed, there has been no sustainable engagement with our community.

Deputy Ó Cuív spoke about what it is possible to achieve. We have seen a shift in a generation from a situation where Irish speakers were isolated and segregated to a position where sustained structural and societal support from the State has seen that situation flipped. The same is possible for Travellers, but the will must be there and there must be a recognition of the value of our community and its contribution. The new legislation could potentially be very powerful if it helps people to begin to understand what we have contributed to this society via music, crafts, language and our understanding of oral traditions. If people understood that, they would have a better sense of where we are and why we are here. However, that is only one step in the process. There must be restoration to address the horrendous cuts that were made and more programmes must be put in place. We need not only to devise an educational strategy but to ensure that it is implemented, audited and surveyed. There must be accountability. The only people experiencing the consequences of the lack of accountability and engagement are Travellers themselves. We are talking about people who are very much isolated in society and at the heel of the foot of many people. The State has a responsibility to intervene now. If it does not, how many more generations will we leave behind us?

Chairman: We are not going back to segregated education, but will the delegates indicate which things from the past were helpful and should be reinstated? What new initiatives do they recommend? When he appeared before the committee, Mr. Thomas McCann spoke clearly about the mental health issues affecting members of the Traveller community and described an indifference to their difficulties. Do the delegates agree that Mr. McCann's observation holds water in regard to the education system or would they describe it differently? I am looking for a broad perspective on what should be brought back that we used to have, what new initiatives should be included in the education strategy and the view of the witnesses on the general attitude of the education system to Traveller education.

Mr. Oein de Bhairdúin: From my own experience, there is a sense of indifference within the educational structures. That experience, which is common, is of encountering an incredible hostility when one identifies oneself as a Traveller or when one raises concerns about some of

the problematic material or narrative that is presented. Many people will choose to disengage rather than continuously face that daily onslaught of negativity, reduction in resources and isolation. There is no doubt in my mind that there are structures in place which are very hostile to Travellers for being Travellers.

Two things that were helpful in the past were the visiting teacher service and the provision of additional resources. One of the changes that is required is that it should be teachers from our community doing the teaching. The reduction in resources that we have described has caused significant damage because it removed linkages that were there with people who may not have been involved in the traditional structures and wanted to maintain some degree of nomadism while also valuing and wanting to pursue their educational progression. We strongly recommend that the visiting teacher service be reinstated in a new form that facilitates nomadism. Sometimes Travellers do not talk about the fact that we are nomadic, although we are limited in terms of how often we are allowed to move.

Ms Shreya Chaturvedi: I spoke about the diversity and equality training that is delivered as part of the Yellow Flag programme. Mandatory anti-racism and intercultural training has been proposed by a number of statutory bodies but is not available in practice. That is something we need to address with a view to making it mandatory. We have been in discussion with the Department of Education and Skills about the training we are developing as a resource to be used by teachers. As part of the programme, schools are required to review or create anti-discrimination, anti-racism and anti-bullying policies. However, what is required is a strong national anti-racism policy for education, which includes Travellers and looks at ways to prevent discrimination in schools.

Chairman: Is the Yellow Flag programme on a firm financial footing and is it wide ranging enough to do the job? It sounds like a very positive initiative but I wonder how stable it is.

Ms Shreya Chaturvedi: Our limited capacity is evident from the backlog of schools that want to be part of the programme. We have had to reject more than 80 schools, some more than once. It is very important, as I said earlier, to look at schools with very few or no Travellers, because most of the schools that want to be part of the programme have a rich cultural diversity in their population. It needs to be adopted by schools which do not have that diversity, otherwise, the problems will manifest when the pupils leave school. We need to address these issues at primary and secondary level.

Chairman: Will Ms Chaturvedi confirm that schools are applying to participate in the Yellow Flag programme but cannot be accepted because of a lack of resources and funding?

Ms Shreya Chaturvedi: Yes.

Chairman: That is a terrible shame.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: It is an issue of supply and demand. The programme is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.

Chairman: Does it receive any funding from the Department of Education and Skills?

Mr. Bernard Joyce: It does not, and that is a core issue. We often talk about the importance of schools becoming places that are welcoming and in which young people feel their education is a priority. It is really about making sure that will happen in terms of having anti-racism and equality policies in place.

Chairman: It seems to be a very positive initiative.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: It is.

Chairman: It needs to be placed on a much firmer footing to do the work that is important. I welcome Jack Leahy from Malahide community school, Anna Crowley from Mount Anville, Martin McGibney from St. Patrick's College in Cavan and Hannah Furey from St. Anne's College in Killaloe. They are all transition year students. We hope we are giving them food for thought.

I detect a sense of weariness among those who have come here. People have been telling their stories about mental health, health and education issues. It is time for the State to play its part. The delegates are carrying a heavy load. They are talking to the Oireachtas and we are listening, but that load must also be shared. Education is the key. My father finished school at the age of 12 years and his children were fortunate to receive an education which was not the norm for him. I endorse the points made by Deputy Ó Cuív and others. Teachers and others must be visible and there must be affirmative action. Mr. Collins has outlined that there is an affirmative action strand in the NTRIS. We will want to hear about it when the Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality, Deputy Stanton, comes before the committee, in particular about education. Mr. Collins likened it to raising the number of Irish speakers and the effect it had on a marginalised community. There must be positive steps and actions taken similar to those in teaching and other areas. Intercultural education seems to be pivotal and the key.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: The national education strategy is crucial. We cannot make progress on anything without the State taking the lead. We are playing our part and coming up with great innovative initiatives, but there must be-----

Chairman: Political leadership from the State.

Mr. Bernard Joyce: Yes and a State policy.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I agree totally. When one looks at comparative models, one sees the provision of intensive State support. That is what is required in this instance. Education is required for the whole of society. Most schools have teachers of the same quality who have been to the same training colleges, but the outcomes are vastly different across socioeconomic groups. When one looks at other things to effect change, that is where the State has to step up to the plate.

Chairman: As Deputy Gino Kenny said, we must move forwards, not backwards. The State must be an activist and interventionist to bring about a shift.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: There must be positive discrimination. When we give Travellers the same as everybody else and they succeed, it will deny the effect of their socioeconomic background for many years.

Chairman: We will have two more modules on education. We will have a chance to put the points made by the delegates to the Minister and his officials. I want to bang the drum for the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill which has just passed through the Seanad. That is good, but it must continue its journey through the Dáil also. That is another part of the work that needs to continue. I thank everyone for his or her efforts and energy in coming here. I also thank members of the committee and our guests.

JKITC

The joint committee adjourned at 12.40 p.m. until 11 a.m. Tuesday, 26 November 2019.