

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

### JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COM- MUNITY

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*Dé Máirt, 26 Samhain 2019*

*Tuesday, 26 November 2019*

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The Joint Committee met at 11 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies

Seanadóirí / Senators

Joan Collins,	Lynn Ruane.
Marcella Corcoran Kennedy,	
Martin Ferris,	
Éamon Ó Cuív.	

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

## **Business of Joint Committee**

**Chairman:** As we have a quorum, I call the meeting to order. Apologies have been received from Deputy Gino Kenny. I propose we go into private session to deal with some housekeeping matters.

*The joint committee went into private session at 11.03 a.m. and resumed in public session at 11.06 a.m.*

### **Traveller Education: Discussion (Resumed)**

**Chairman:** I welcome members of the committee, and viewers who may be watching our proceedings on Oireachtas TV, to the meeting, the purpose of which is to continue the committee's deliberations on the topic of education and how it impacts on the Traveller community. This is our third session. The committee has heard from Ms Catherine Joyce of the Blanchardstown Traveller Development Group, the National Traveller Women's Forum, Mr. Patrick Nevin of the Travellers' Community Development Project, Mr. Oein de Bhairdúin, Mr. Martin Collins of Pavee Point, and Ms Shreya Chaturvedi and Mr. Bernard Joyce of the Irish Traveller Movement and its Yellow Flag programme.

When the committee heard from Mr. Oein de Bhairdúin last week, he told us that it is a misconception that Travellers do not value education. This message has come through loud and strong in our deliberations on education. I am sure we will hear more to that effect this morning. Mr. de Bhairdúin said:

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.

The committee heard that Travellers are far more likely to be put on reduced-hours timetables and that travellers are 50 times more likely to leave school without a leaving certificate. This is a very hard, strong, clear and sobering fact. Some 57% of male Travellers are educated to primary level at most, and only 13% of Traveller females are educated to upper secondary level or above compared to 70% of the wider population. Fewer than 1% of Travellers have a third level qualification. In 2011-12 during the height of the recession, there were draconian cuts to Traveller education that resulted in visiting teacher services being disbanded and a loss of 42 resource teacher jobs. Those cuts still have not been reversed in any meaningful way. Traveller centres were also closed.

We heard how Travellers do not so much drop out but are pushed out through bullying, lack of adequate supports and understanding, etc. That is what Pavee Point stated last week. There are also some positive aspects in this area, and we will hear about some of those today. Some six new schools will get the yellow flag in Leinster House this Thursday and that is to be celebrated. Again, however, that programme runs on a shoestring and it would be good to see it put on a firmer footing. It is something practical the Department of Education and Skills could consider and I am sure that will feature in our recommendations

These sessions are concerned with removing barriers or identifying ways to remove the barriers for children who routinely find the door closed to them. We need to learn how to make

schools warm, welcoming and safe spaces for Travellers, how to clear the pathways and take specific and affirmative action so that Travellers can enjoy their right to education in the same way as the general population. We will be hearing today from Deputy Jan O’Sullivan. It is a miserable morning and she is stuck in traffic. She is on her way, however. The Deputy is a former Minister for Education and Skills and current co-chair of the Oireachtas Traveller Group, and it will be valuable to hear her perspective on these issues. I also think she is presenting the yellow flag awards on Thursday. We will also be hearing from Dr. Teresa O’Doherty from the Marino Institute of Education, MIE, and from Mr. Patrick McDonagh, a Traveller and PhD student in medieval history at Trinity College Dublin.

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 evidence 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. 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 also advise that any submission or opening statement made to the committee will be published on its website after the meeting. That website is a fantastic repository of information.

We will take questions from members of the committee after the witnesses have presented. I call Dr. O’Doherty to make her opening statement.

**Dr. Teresa O’Doherty:** The MIE welcomes and appreciates the opportunity to engage with the committee. An associated college of Trinity College Dublin and established more than 100 years ago, MIE offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in education, and in teacher education in particular. The college has 1,100 students, half of whom are registered on initial teacher education programmes at undergraduate or postgraduate level. We would like to bring our work on initial teacher education to the attention of the committee today and especially our access to initial teacher education programmes for students from the Traveller community.

We initiated a three-year project in May 2018, called Tobar, as part of the programme for access to higher education run by the Higher Education Authority, HEA. The overall objective of the project is to enroll four Travellers on initial teacher education programmes and, to date, two Traveller students have progressed via Tobar to initial teacher education programmes. One is now enrolled on a professional masters of education in primary teaching at MIE and the other is enrolled at Maynooth University on a professional masters of education in post-primary teaching. It will be noted that the students mentioned are studying at postgraduate level and have completed a leaving certificate and an undergraduate degree programme.

From its outset, Tobar established a two-strand approach for its intervention. Strand 1 focuses on Traveller students aged 15 to 18 years old who aspire to become teachers. Strand 2 focuses on Travellers who may want to enrol on the B.Ed. programme through the mature entry route or those who already have undergraduate degrees but wish to enrol on professional masters programmes.

In the current year of 2019-20, our project is putting additional focus on Strand 1 and on the students at second level who may aspire to become teachers. The project has already es-

established positive relationships with schools, community groups and, in many cases, individual families. At present nine students, ranging from the junior cycle to the leaving certificate, are registered with the TOBAR project. In each case, the TOBAR project officer works in collaboration with school staff to determine each student's interest, disposition and academic ability. Suitable supports and interventions are then scheduled depending on the individual needs of students.

Within Strand 1 we deliver in-school workshops for students on becoming a primary teacher. We meet families and arrange for the students to visit the Marino Institute of Education. To date, we have worked on about 30 visits and 30 workshops in schools. In addition, our project officer has engaged in sustained collaboration with Traveller groups and, for example, has been invited to join the board of Exchange House.

Although the TOBAR project is only in its second year of activity, we have learned a good deal about the concerns, fears and difficulties faced by Traveller students in schools. We have also learned about the frustration of Traveller graduates in terms of their careers post third-level study. It is telling that the first reaction from Traveller students in the workshops is incredulity at the suggestion that they could, if they so wished, become teachers. The lack of ambition within the students to become a teacher or pursue any professional career reflects society's failure and that of the education system to actively promote careers to Traveller students.

The Traveller students we have worked with often show a lack of belief in themselves. This, combined with a lack of belief in the education system and higher education, means that students who can succeed in pursuing professional careers often drop out or drop back in subjects. I mean they move from honours level to ordinary level or foundation level in their subjects for reasons that are not aligned with their academic ability. Without any intervention such changes have long-term consequences for the students in terms of accessing higher education.

Initial teacher education or ITE programmes have minimum entry requirements. It is vitally important that a student who aspires to a teaching career is aware of the necessity to achieve the minimum entry requirements and maintain enough higher level subjects to achieve points to access an ITE programme through the Central Applications Office, CAO. In such a case, it is equally important for the student's family and teachers to be aware of their student's aspiration and provide what support they can.

It is important to emphasise that our engagement with schools through TOBAR has been extremely positive. The level of facilitation that has been afforded to TOBAR by school staff has been, and will be, integral to the successful achievement of the project's aims. The institute's partners, within the Leinster Pillar - Cluster 1, have also been generous with their time and expertise. We acknowledge the Higher Education Authority, HEA, as the funder of TOBAR and appreciate its ongoing support.

Within the institute, TOBAR is operated by a small team and I thank everyone involved. The HEA funds half of the cost of one project officer and the institute co-funds the remaining half. We also have access to a very small stream of philanthropic funding to support Traveller students who enter our programmes. However, if the institute is to continue to bring Travellers through the TOBAR programme additional funding will need to be sourced not just for operational aspects but, more important, to support students while on their ITE programmes. I wish to emphasise that the initial teacher education programme is very expensive. The institute is acutely conscious that it is a significant risk for any third-level institution to raise aspirations and subsequent expectations for members of the Traveller community without having the re-

sources to support access, retention and progression through the ITE programmes. Therefore, as part of our recommendations in our written submission, we strongly suggest consideration be given to establishing a centralised funding stream to support Travellers to pursue initial teacher education programmes.

**Chairman:** I thank Dr. O’Doherty for her presentation and call on Deputy O’Sullivan. I know she has had a tough time getting here this morning. If she is ready, we would be interested to hear from her. She and I are co-chairs of the Oireachtas group on Travellers.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** I thank the Chair. I will first apologise, as traffic was horrendous. I thank the Chair for the invitation to address the committee on the topic of education and the Traveller community, with particular reference to school completion rates and educational attainment compared with the settled community. There is no doubt that this is an issue that needs to be addressed urgently, given that statistics show that Travellers’ progression rates from junior to senior level in post-primary school and from post-primary to further and higher education are well below the levels of their non-Traveller peers. The 2011 census was some time ago, but according to it only 8% of Travellers had completed education to leaving certificate level compared with 73% of non-Travellers and only 1% of Travellers aged 25 to 64 years had a degree compared with 30% of non-Travellers. These statistics are stark and need to be changed.

I will touch on what I consider to be the main issues. Since I am conscious that I speak as a non-Traveller, my first point is that listening to the voice of Travellers and acting on what they say are crucial and central to deliberations. I know that the committee is doing that.

As a member of the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills and co-chair of the cross-party group on Travellers’ issues, I have had the opportunity to engage with Travellers in considerable detail, including in my community. The Committee on Education and Skills has produced a report on issues of transition in the education system and an interim report on reduced timetables, which we are working on progressing with the Department of Education and Skills. The issue of reduced timetables had been hidden. We were not, and indeed many people were not, aware of how much reduced timetables were being used in respect of Traveller children in particular, but also other children, in the education system. Since our interim report, we held a meeting on 5 November with the Department on the progress being made in addressing the points that we had made concerning reduced timetables. I am hopeful that there will be progress.

During the course of our hearings on progression, we learned that a proportionately large number of Traveller children were subjected to so-called reduced timetables, which effectively constitute exclusion from schools for long periods and have to date been at the discretion of schools, with little or no consultation with parents. We learned that children with special needs were also subject to such discrimination. They also presented to the committee. As a result of our hearings and recommendations, I am confident that there will be radical changes in how these measures are used or not used in future. Some of the issues that we raised were about not sending children home without full consultation and agreement with parents and only using reduced timetables as a last resort. Data must be gathered on this, given that it is a hidden situation.

The fundamental issue at stake is every child’s right to an education, as guaranteed in the Constitution. A rights-based approach is fundamental to achieving the changes necessary to ensure that children in the Traveller community have full access to and full support in education. The other issue that underpins progress is understanding and validation of the Traveller

way of life and cultural history so that Traveller and settled children and teachers understand one another's identities, have confidence in their own, and value diversity in the school and educational environment. As well as Travellers, this affects many other children who are at risk of misunderstanding.

I understand that the Minister has not published a report carried out by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, auditing the curriculum on Traveller history and culture. It is important to find out when that report will be published. I welcome the Chair's Bill. I will work with her and others to ensure it progresses through the Dáil as it has the Seanad.

Many of the initiatives contained in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021, NTRIS, have not been implemented since the strategy's launch in June 2017. These need to be tracked and followed through. The reinstatement of the Traveller education advisory committee would provide a mechanism for issues affecting Travellers' progression in education to be brought directly to the Minister by Travellers themselves. Other points have been raised by previous speakers. Any initiative should especially recognise the importance of collating and monitoring data nationally as a matter of priority where Travellers are at risk of early school leaving and also establishing a Traveller-specific education strategy. The Department of Education and Skills or Tusla should collect data on the practice of reduced timetables, to which I referred. I believe there will be progress in that regard.

Intercultural awareness training should form a mandatory component of continuous teacher professional development. While it is already included in teacher education, it is particularly important that teachers who have gone beyond the initial stage of education should also have mandatory intercultural awareness training throughout their teaching lives.

There are some specific programmes that could make a real difference if they were provided nationwide. A young man from Galway addressed the Joint Committee on Education and Skills. He told members of an after-school programme he attended that gave him one-on-one support to deal with difficulties he had in achieving his potential in school. It helped him to progress to third level education. Programmes such as this, which have been shown to work, should be mainstreamed because they have the potential to make a significant difference.

I look forward to the recommendations of this committee across all areas. We particularly need to have mechanisms for monitoring to ensure the recommendations it makes are implemented. On the recommendations the committee will make on education, it will be important that the education committee work with this committee to ensure that the work of both committees contributes to positive change for Traveller children and their families.

**Chairman:** I thank Deputy O'Sullivan. I now call on Mr. Patrick McDonagh, Traveller and PhD student in medieval history, to make his presentation.

**Mr. Patrick McDonagh:** I thank the committee for the invitation. I am a PhD student at Trinity College Dublin and I am also a Traveller.

I believe that education is one of the major problems facing the Traveller community and the most pressing one in many ways, at least from my perspective. Only 1% of Travellers have a third level qualification. This is quite a bleak statistic that needs to be addressed and changed. The existence of this special Oireachtas committee is a positive sign and one that I hope can help bring positive change to the community.

As I mentioned in my written submission, there are many issues facing Traveller participa-

tion in education at all levels. These include cost, unfamiliarity, discrimination and fear. I have also suggested some provisional potential solutions to these issues, particularly the creation of Traveller scholarships and a deliberate policy of focusing on Traveller children in late primary and early secondary school. When I refer to education I do not mean only my own route through to a university education but education in the broad sense of further education courses and apprenticeships, as well as universities. It would be a mistake to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach. This extends beyond the Traveller community to the wider community. Education in all the different areas should be encouraged based on people's interests and skills and what they want to do.

Some of the problems I have outlined in my submission are generational that will only change with time. However, in the case of some of the other problems, if concerted action was taken now, it would create a push to help change. Some of the problems I have outlined are costs and unfamiliarity. Focusing on Traveller children in later primary school and early secondary school and creating scholarships would encourage a greater number of Travellers to continue in education than is currently the case. The ideal hope would be that pursuing policies such as this, at least for a certain period, would help to create a critical mass which would then self-perpetuate. I believe the numbers doing so are currently too small and they are more of an anomaly so the position is not sustainable. We will see a real change in Travellers' educational attainments if action is taken now rather than pushing the issue down the road.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. McDonagh. I hope everyone had a chance to read his very succinct and practical submission. It would be helpful to tease it out. I now open the debate up to my fellow committee members.

**Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy:** I thank the witnesses for coming in and making their interesting presentations to us. It is helpful in our deliberations in this committee. We have a report to produce and we will be making recommendations based on what we have heard. I thank them accordingly.

Will Deputy O'Sullivan expand a little on the reduced hours? That is news to me. How does that work on a practical level? If the children all go into school at the same time, are some of the children then sent home at a particular time? She might expand on that because it is the first time I have heard about that.

It sounds like the Tobar programme should be mainstreamed. We might think a little more about that in terms of our recommendations. Dr. O'Doherty talked a lot about the children and their ambitions, and Mr. McDonagh did the same. I wonder about reaching the parents to encourage the children. Clearly, they have a considerable influence on their children. In any community, if parents have ambitions for their children, the children will do well. Is there any programme to share with parents how there is potential there and possibilities for the children that the parents themselves may never have had? Is that a direction the witnesses would consider? Maybe it is happening somewhere. Is it something that we could be looking at as well?

I deal a lot with young Traveller families. I notice that they are young. There is nothing unusual in that to my age group. I was married at 25. By then, some of my school friends were married for five years and had children. They got married at 19 and 20. Mr. McDonagh touched on culture. Is that shifting in the Traveller community now, although a little slower than it did in the settled community? For example, it would be unusual for my children's generation to get married at the age I did. They are marrying later. Is there anything there that we need to be looking at, for instance, in terms of encouraging people to remain in education longer? It struck

me, as Mr. McDonagh was talking, as something that may be worth looking at as well.

**Chairman:** Who would like to go first?

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** I can. I thank Deputy Corcoran Kennedy. First of all, we published a draft interim report from the Joint Committee on Education and Skills. Maybe I could ask that the report be circulated to all the members of this committee, which would be useful, and that we keep in touch with this committee. As I said, we had an interaction with the Department of Education and Skills recently and we will be returning to the subject and issuing a final report.

To be quite honest, it came as a bit of a surprise to all of us, as members of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills as well. We were looking, first of all, at Traveller education separately, and the representatives of Travellers groups told us about reduced timetables being a big issue for Traveller families. We subsequently decided we would conduct a full investigation on the issue and we found that other groups were similarly affected. For example, AsIAm, which represents those who are on the autism spectrum, came in and presented and it turned out that it was a very significant issue for children on the autism spectrum as well.

One of the worrying elements about it is that it is only supposed to be used rarely and as a last resort, but in practice it appears to be used, certainly by some schools, whereby the parent gets a phone call to collect the child and the child has to be taken home, but there would not be advance discussion with the parents as to whether this is a good or bad thing. In some limited situations, for example, where a child has a real phobia about school or whatever, the parents might say that it is good that the child does not have to spend the full day in school. In the majority of cases, however, it appears to have been purely the school acting off its own bat. Obviously, the school is much more powerful than the parent in many situations. Many parents themselves might have had a bad experience of school and would not feel that they could argue for their child in an equal way. This is another recommendation that we made, that there must be at least an equal relationship and that it should be with the agreement of a parent if reduced timetables are used.

No data are collected because these are not expulsions. This is something that the Department has stated it will correct. Expulsions are recorded. Reduced timetables are not considered to be expulsions and, in some cases, a parent is made to feel that if he or she does not accept a reduced timetable, his or her child is at risk of expulsion. It is a really difficult issue for many families. By bringing it out into the open and insisting that data on it will be collected, that there will be proper engagement with parents and that it will only be used as a last resort, the system will change.

The managerial bodies and representatives of principals and deputy principals all stated that it should only be used on very rare occasions, but we obtained evidence that it is used quite a lot in practice. This means that a significant number of Traveller children and children with special needs are not getting access to their right to a full timetable in school. If they fall back, it is much more difficult for them to gain a proper education. It is a matter of rights. If this committee and the Joint Committee on Education and Skills argue strongly that this simply has to change, it will make a difference in the context of opportunities for Traveller children and children in some of the other categories.

**Chairman:** I strongly suggest that we circulate that interim report. The Minister for Education and Skills will come before the committee next week. We can ask him what action is being

taken on foot of the report. It would be helpful for us to make common cause with the Joint Committee on Education and Skills on this matter which, as Deputy Jan O'Sullivan stated, was hidden in plain sight and not officially documented by the Department. This practice affects Traveller children in particular and children with special needs. Dr. O'Doherty was asked some specific questions.

**Dr. Teresa O'Doherty:** Student ambition and the ambitions of families were mentioned. It is very important that we create supports so that families have ambitions. Not everybody wants to become a teacher. We are working on initial teacher education access, but students may have had poor experiences of teachers in school. We need to invest in creating career trajectories for young people, beginning at second or even primary level, and support them along the way to enable them to choose who they would like to be. They would then know that they need to do the leaving certificate and get points in order to do that.

If a child has been put on a restricted timetable, the level of ambition and encouragement to attend school is not very strong when he or she feels unwelcome. One of the issues is that children who want to become teachers at primary level must have higher level leaving certificate Irish. As part of our support for students, we have provided grinds and Irish language classes on campus and in homes. We are offering trips to the Gaeltacht, which other children go on, to support them. We do not want to dilute the entry requirement; rather, we are enabling students to reach that target.

Our project officer has spent a lot of time working with families because the whole family sends a student to school. Students cannot achieve their goals without the support of their parents and siblings. While parents are very supportive of and ambitious for their children in many ways, they know they cannot afford certain things and many children feel they do not want to put an undue burden on their families in order to go to college, which is very expensive. Working with families, raising expectations and knowing that the system can be trusted are all important.

In our written submission we raised the fact that many students feel they cannot trust the system, even the higher education system, because when the very small number of Travellers who attend third level are awarded degrees they cannot get employment. We are supporting people through the different transitions from primary to post-primary and post-primary to third level, but a lot of support is needed in terms of retention in third level and transition to the workforce.

Structured support was mentioned. The time has come to make sure there is specific structured support for these students, over and above what might be given to other candidates. Poverty and disadvantage are intergenerational. I think that needs a lot of support. Now is the time, and I think Mr. McDonagh said it extremely well, to grasp that when we have work like the PATH project happening in different higher educational organisations, supporting Travellers through teacher education or through education generally.

**Chairman:** Mr. McDonagh, do you have any comments to make in response?

**Mr. Patrick McDonagh:** Thank you for the question. In regard to the parents, I think they should be brought in and be very closely involved. One idea that should at least be considered is a focus on Traveller children in primary and early secondary school, perhaps by some kind of external mechanism would bring in the parents. Both of my parents supported me for my educational route, and I went a long way. I always asked if I was doing something, what was going

to be the result? Given that many Travellers do not have secondary educations never mind a completed third level qualification, there is not the same awareness of what is going to be the point of something or what one will achieve out of it. If one includes the parents and career advisers who can explain that if one wants to be an accountant or a school teacher one has to do a certain thing - one needs at least a leaving certificate or one has to do an apprenticeship or one needs a particular degree. We must at least provide the steps to show them how it is meant to be done. For some Travellers, they feel like they cannot do that or that is really not their place. This is about showing people this is how they can do it. If there was a route that could be shown to them, that would help and encourage them that their children can do it. It is very important to bring that in because, obviously, it is very hard for a child or teenager to do anything without parents' support. This will help a lot to bring them in and, also, it is about being proud. I was quite lucky in that regard but I cannot speak for everyone in that sense.

Culture was mentioned, people marrying young and that still exists today. My own parents married quite young. I am 23 years of age and I have not married, which is quite old in some sense depending on one's point of view, but I am doing a PhD. If people are doing degrees, by definition they are probably not going to get married until afterwards. That does not preclude people marrying before or during, but there is less of a possibility. It depends on the educational route a person takes and obviously personal choice, so that is something that probably will change if there are more Travellers going onto higher educational routes, but that will be a generational change rather than an overnight one.

**Chairman:** From the groups of Traveller parents that I have met down through the years, there is plenty of ambition and there is plenty of aspiration, it is just that the system does not support Travellers. Their children get excluded, are on a reduced timetable, are getting bullied and listening to nasty words and hate speech. Then there are the practicalities of the cost. Staying in education is expensive. There was a group in Cork who were saying that for people who did have their children younger, it was very often when their children were young that they were stimulated to go back into education. I know that if Senator Ruane was in the room, she would have plenty to say about that. There are different routes to education, and we do not always need to take the traditional or linear route. It is important that all of those routes are open.

**Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy:** One thing just struck me there; if you see it, you can be it. I wonder if there are any initiatives that would, for example, help Mr. McDonagh or others share why they decided to take the path they did. We have had some wonderful presenters in here over the last few weeks, and I wonder if there is something like that out there where, for example, an expert farrier, a teacher, somebody doing a PhD could share their experience and say "if I can do it, you can do it". There is obviously a need for such an initiative, but if there was something there, it could be built on.

**Mr. Patrick McDonagh:** There is nothing currently that I am aware of, but it is something that should be built on. I was quite lucky in my circumstances. I never had a teacher who told me I could not do something. I went to a school where most people did go to university. If students performed academically, there was no reason for them to be told they would not be going, unless they chose not to go.

Having said that, however, my younger brother had a bad experience of school. I refer to fighting, bullying and unsympathetic teachers. The experience of education in my own family was, therefore, different. My brother is doing an apprenticeship now. He decided to go back into education and pursue a qualification, but one quite different from mine. That is a good example. Even though his experience in school was negative, he still decided that it was a

good thing to return to education and to try to get a qualification because he was interested. We cannot rely on lucky circumstances or having good teachers, however. There are many good teachers, but many Travellers still do have a very good experience of school. I did, but my brother did not. I am perhaps rare in my experience rather than an example of what is normal for Travellers. There needs to be more sustained encouragement to tell Travellers that they can pursue education and that it is not just for settled people. Education should be seen as being for anyone.

**Dr. Teresa O’Doherty:** I will make two points. We have students coming through who want their ethnicity to be identified and who want to be recognised as Travellers, but we also have some students who do not. It is very hard on those students. Even those students who have come through the Tobar project might not necessarily want that said to their peers. They have to work through their own willingness to identify as a Traveller. That is always a challenge for students and a very personal issue for them and their identity. It would be wonderful if we had students, like Mr. McDonagh, who were willing to encourage others by telling them they can do this, but some students in the system do not want to be identified as Travellers for a variety of reasons, including fear. That is a very hard situation to be in. I would also like to mention that in initial teacher education programs, particularly in our institution, we certainly do much intercultural work to ensure students are exposed to as much information about Traveller culture and education as possible. As was mentioned earlier, however, that process needs to go further and be part of professional development throughout teachers’ careers.

**Deputy Jan O’Sullivan:** I will give some brief information on the yellow flag programme. Those flags are awarded to schools if they are inclusive and anti-racist. Schools must have a whole programme on inclusion of Travellers and Traveller culture, but also on other potentially excluded cultures. That programme is running in a limited number of schools, however. Yellow flags will be presented to six schools in the audiovisual room here in Leinster House this Thursday, but there is no core funding for the programme. If such funding existed, the programme could be expanded to many other schools. I say that because some schools are Traveller friendly while others are not. An inclusive programme of that sort for all schools would be very beneficial and would help with a situation such as that experienced by Mr. McDonagh’s brother. I refer to young Traveller children who feel they do not fit in school, are not being treated properly and are not fully included.

**Chairman:** We are hearing a recurring theme in the areas of education, health and mental health that great work is happening but is often funded on a wing and a prayer. We heard that this morning about the yellow flag programme, the Tobar initiative and the Ballyfermot group, and it is important that this committee recommends action in this area. These initiatives work, but they need mainstream funding and not to be dependent on philanthropic funds, as is the case with Tobar. This is far too fundamental an issue for that to be the case. We cannot leave things to the vagaries of philanthropists or occasional donors. These programmes should be on a firm funding footing. Traveller pride, for instance, an initiative similar to what Deputy Corcoran Kennedy described, is also funded on a shoestring. It is important that proper resources and funding be put into these kinds of initiatives, and there should also be an examination of previous cuts that now need to be reversed.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** Before I came in here this morning I reflected on my schooldays. In 1974, I commenced secondary school and sat my leaving certificate examination in 1979.

**Chairman:** I now know the age of the Deputy.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** That was a time when working class kids were given an opportunity to avail of secondary school education. However, some of my peers and people in my year left after they sat the intermediate certificate exam due to pressure from their families to leave school and earn money. In fact, many of them became seamstresses. However, my Ma and Da made sure that I remained in school until I sat my leaving certificate examination. They wanted me to at least attain a leaving certificate, which I did, and then I commenced working in the public sector. We are not trying to reinvent the wheel in terms of education. This is a group of people who, like what happened to working class people in the past, were not encouraged to remain and continue in education. The State made a conscious decision because first it needed people for jobs but they had to have attained a certain level of education and it recognised that people needed an education. What is happening with Traveller education is a microcosm of what happened to working class people in the past. The tragedy is that 45 years have elapsed and education should never have reached this stage. This committee can put Traveller education on the agenda in terms of intercultural attitudes in all of the Departments, insist there is a change in mindset and secure funding for education.

My next comments are for Dr. O'Doherty and Mr. McDonagh. Pavee Point has repeatedly referred to the fact that the scheme of visiting teachers for Travellers was discontinued. The scheme had a very good impact on my community in Labre Park where a teacher visited the business school. The families also brought their kids to the school, ensured their children were enrolled and tackled all of the associated problems. Do the witnesses think that the visiting teacher scheme must be re-established? We will not get kids into higher education if they do not attain primary and second level education.

We are talking about higher education and apprenticeships. I agree with the witnesses that the one glove does not fit all and children need variety in terms of education. I recall the time during my schooldays that a sister of a friend of mine, who was an air hostess, visited the school. She told us about her job as an air hostess and how we could apply for such work on completion of the leaving certificate. Such an initiative should be introduced for the Traveller community. I mean that Traveller parents must be informed that their children, if they attain a certain level of education, can achieve certain things. We must also give a commitment to bring those children through. Only by doing structural things like that can we ensure we will not be here in ten or 15 years time talking about the same things.

**Chairman:** The Deputy has asked specific questions on the visiting teacher scheme. She emphasised that structural changes must be put in place that are similar to those that were put in place to assist people from working class backgrounds to access education. Gaps in such access still exist.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** Yes.

**Chairman:** However, we know the methods and means.

**Dr. Teresa O'Doherty:** I totally agree we need some sort of structure, like the visiting teacher, that liaises with families right through and supports Traveller children through communications with schools and accessing the curriculum. Parents will not realise it is important for their child to do honours Irish, for example, unless someone communicates that to them. We need the visiting teacher structure right through the system but we must assist the children in schools and their parents to get through into second level and through the process. We must also provide assistance all the way through to employment. One needs a whole support system wherever that employment is whether it is an apprenticeship or higher education. I say that

because we have found that even with the students who have come through higher education are now postgraduates in teacher education. They had negative experiences of trying to get jobs once they were qualified with a degree. Assistance is not just needed at primary and post-primary levels, there must be structures right through.

I would also like there to be some sort of targeted entry route to professions, whether through apprenticeships or higher education, outside of the mainstream. In our proposal, we suggested a structure whereby at junior cycle, if a student is identified as being high achieving and capable, he or she will be nurtured throughout the next two or three years, with a promise of a place in college if he or she satisfies the minimum entry requirements. It would not be a matter of taking a place from another candidate. They would be *ex quota* places dedicated to the Traveller community. We need something as targeted and specialist as that now, which we did not have in the past for working class students. Such special support will be necessary for the next five to ten years in order that in ten years, a greater number of successful candidates will come through the system and be able to become the bearer of that torch for their communities. Currently, however, it is difficult for anyone with a degree to return to the community and say that, having done well, he or she cannot get a job, or that, having done well in the leaving certificate, he or she cannot get into college. It would be useful to have a visiting teacher at primary and post-primary levels, right through to career support, identifying the career trajectories people might want, whether that is in the Garda, the Civil Service, nursing, the legal profession or teaching.

**Mr. Patrick McDonagh:** The use of visiting teachers should be revived. A clear need for it was felt at the time, and it was successful and worked. Especially in Labre Park, it would help because the group knowledge is not there. It is not normal. Much like in the case of working class communities 40 years ago, or in Northern Ireland, where I am from, Catholic communities 50 years ago, if people are not used to a certain type of education, it might be that no one will tell the student what he or she has to do. There are deadlines, and the student will have to pass examinations and choose which subjects to take. It would be useful to have someone come to the school to explain that, even to the parents, which might be of more value because they can then tell the child why he or she is not studying Irish, or whatever the case might be.

Direct action is needed now because unless the infrastructure is provided for the routes that have been outlined, there will be no point talking about it. There should be a targeted Irish Traveller scholarship. The numbers would be quite small for the time being and, therefore, the cost for the State to bear would be quite low. It would be worth pursuing. If nothing is done to encourage the student when he or she is in primary or secondary school, there will be no point waiting until he or she is 16, 17 or 18 years old and saying, given that he or she has reached that far, that he or she might get a scholarship at that point, because there will not be enough students coming through the system even to partake in that. It needs to be applied the whole way.

Likewise, there is not much point telling 11 year old children they can do this or that, and then, when they are 17 or 18 years old, telling them we have no way of helping them. It needs to be consistent from a young age because many Travellers do not complete secondary school. The age group of ten to 14 years old will probably be the most important to target and encourage that they can do something different. They need to know they do not have to live how their parents did or to have no education qualifications. They should not be afraid of doing something different.

Even the identification of negative experiences is important. Statistics for Travellers at university depends on self-identification. While I have had no issue with doing that, I do not blame others who would have an issue because there is a fear that it will have an impact on one's social

circle and even job prospects. It is like writing down the wrong address when applying for jobs. Many people fear that stating they are a Traveller would only encourage a rejection, even if they were highly qualified for the role.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** We have experienced that. Someone who wrote Coolock as an address on a job application in the 1970s would not even be considered.

**Chairman:** Mr. McDonagh might like to share an experience he had at Trinity Hall.

**Mr. Patrick McDonagh:** In the summer before I began university, I was slightly anxious. School was mostly fine for me with maybe one or two negative experiences but it was mostly quite good. It was quite a good school. During the summer I was concerned as to whether it would come up. I moved into Trinity Halls and on my first proper day in Trinity someone said it would be horrendous to have a Traveller as a flatmate, which obviously was quite an interesting exposure to college. I have been lucky that it has been quite a rare occurrence for me. That was my first real impression of being in Trinity. All of my friends know I am a Traveller but sometimes it takes a few months to say it. Not everyone would say they are Traveller with people saying such things in front of them. I have a strong Northern accent. No one in Trinity thought I was a Traveller. People see what they want to see and they see someone coming down from the North and that is all. People will say what they usually think. I do not blame Travellers for not wanting to say they are Travellers because quite rightly they fear it might impact on their social life or work life or even getting a job in the first place.

**Chairman:** There is that exposure to casual racism-----

**Mr. Patrick McDonagh:** Yes.

**Chairman:** -----that can cause people not to put themselves into positions where it may occur.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** The challenge is that we have to change society so people do not feel they have to hide their identity to avoid being hurt. Mr. McDonagh mentioned early intervention. Does he have statistics on Traveller participation in preschool education? I imagine the children of most so-called middle class families who go to college probably had at least one year of preschool education. Programmes such as Aistear and Síolta are in primary schools and preschool education and the quality can be very good. I am not sure whether many Traveller children have access to preschool. It means that when they go to school I imagine the majority of their classmates will have already had at least one free preschool year and now there is a second free year.

**Chairman:** The committee can ask the Department for the statistics on participation.

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** Many Travellers do not live in areas with community crèches. Living on the edge of the city it may be difficult to access one. I do not know whether Mr. McDonagh has gathered statistics on this but perhaps there could also be intervention there and a conscious programme to facilitate Traveller families to have this opportunity. I was involved in preschool education at one stage. I was in Montessori. Any data will tell us that the opportunities people get at a very early stage in their educational experience stands to them hugely later on. It might be an issue.

**Chairman:** We could look at the levels of participation. People need to trust that when they send their little one to a crèche, it is a welcoming place that understands them. This has been

a theme running from early years to primary to secondary level and Mr. McDonagh has given us examples of third level. We will ask for the statistics on uptake of early education because that has an impact on people. It is a positive experience and those children go on to thrive at primary level.

With regard to employment, that will be dealt with in our next module when we have finished with education. There is 80% unemployment in an economy and society with almost full employment. If people cannot see that the sacrifice of staying in education does not lead to a job because people are discriminated against in the workplace, that will also have to be tackled. It is across all of the systems.

**Deputy Martin Ferris:** My apologies for being late. The traffic is unreal.

**Chairman:** That is a common theme emerging that will not be in our report.

**Deputy Martin Ferris:** I thought I would have to come by tractor but what harm. I am very conscious of what Deputy O'Sullivan said about preschool education. Giving Traveller children access to that could be very important. I do not know whether any of the crèches or preschools in my area have Traveller children attending them. Many are privately run and there is a cost factor. Many poor people cannot afford to send their children to privately run crèches or preschools. It is something which should be examined and supported very strongly by Governments.

Early intervention is important because at that age children are at their best mentally to benefit from education. They have a thirst for learning. I fully concur with what Deputy O'Sullivan said. The number of Traveller children who complete their education and go on to third level is very small compared with other groups in society. Children have the ability but do not get a full education. The loss to their community and our society as a consequence should be borne in mind.

**Chairman:** Are there any comments or reactions to the comments made by Deputy Ferris?

**Deputy Jan O'Sullivan:** The free preschool year I mentioned is only free for a certain number of hours a day. I imagine if someone does not have access to a community crèche because there is significant pressure on places, parents who can afford to pay for extra hours in private services probably get preference over those who cannot. I would prefer if all provision was public but the reality is that private facilities exist. There needs to be some kind of positive programme which would allow access for Traveller children to vindicate their right to the free element of the two-year programme.

**Mr. Patrick McDonagh:** I agree that early intervention is key. Given the drop-out rates for Travellers at all stages of education, it is too late to wait until the leaving certificate to intervene. It does not matter how many scholarships are offered or university or apprenticeship schemes are in place if only a small number of Travellers get that far because they will not be effective. The main thing is to build a critical mass of Travellers who have gone forward and will encourage others. It is no good me being here on my own. The numbers progressing are still quite small and there are too few to make this self-sustaining, unlike in the settled population where progression to third level is an acceptable route.

**Chairman:** Mr. McDonagh made four recommendations. He referred to deliberate targeting, which was clear. Firm recommendations have come from all witnesses today that affirmative action needs to happen from the early years, right through to primary, second and third level

and into employment. Initiatives that are working, like Yellow Flag, Tobar and Traveller pride events, need to be put on a firm footing so they are not operating on a wing and a prayer. He also referred to scholarships, but unless the early work is done, they will have a limited impact. His last point concerned legislation on hate speech to address racism towards Travellers. I ask him to explain why it is one of his key recommendations and is so fundamental.

**Mr. Patrick McDonagh:** It is very important because Travellers are a minority group. To put it bluntly, there are few things more dangerous than being a minority group in a democracy that does not like us. We see political parties of all persuasions targeting Travellers as a way of gaining electoral support. That is not a positive atmosphere to have around.

My experience has been being asked why I have many settled friends and why I am good friends with them. Most of my friends are settled people. I still believe there is a strong element within the Irish population who do not much like Travellers, and that is putting it mildly. The same happens in Britain as in Ireland - passing laws that make it illegal to live like a Traveller. It is burn them out or push them out. The history of the State shows it in so many ways. I refer to the anti-Traveller rhetoric in the Dáil in the 1940s and 1950s. There is the Report of the Commission on Itinerancy. It has increasingly created more of a dangerous atmosphere for Travellers. I am not saying it is life and death, but that is not the point in some sense. However, it is bad. Being anti-Traveller often wins candidates support, and unless something is done to address that, it will only get worse.

In fairness, the State has made some improvements. Obviously, there was the formal recognition in 2017, but as I say, formal recognition is in some ways meaningless if no steps are taken to safeguard and protect that group.

By addressing hate speech, it would make it illegal to incite hatred or provoke anger, whether it be through the burning of a halting site, the blocking of halting sites, getting a Traveller removed from a housing estate or whatever the case may be. By doing that, the hope in the short term is that it will discourage it. It will not change the current generation's perception or opinions. There is no such thing as an overnight cure. The point is that it becomes a long-term process of changing views to recognise that it is wrong to do that.

I have mentioned many problems but all of my solutions are not overnight solutions. These are ten or 20-year solutions. That is the best way of viewing that. Unless something is done now, there will be same ideas in 20 years.

**Chairman:** Are hate speech laws fundamental to addressing the institutional racism that seems to be at play in the educational system and the health system? Many people made presentations to the committee. There is, at best, inertia. There is indifference and then there is the institutionalised racism. I refer to the lack of progress and the lack of good initiatives, and the initiatives that have not had the impact that they were meant to have. Repeatedly, for example, we see the local authorities not spending their budgets or the funding allocated to them. In employment, we see where employers, both in the State sector and in the private sector, routinely discriminate against Travellers in terms of access to jobs. In offering rental accommodation, landlords also discriminate against Travellers. It is right across the system. Mr. McDonagh would seem to be giving the committee a strong message that it is most important that there would be strong hate speech laws that can underpin progress not only in education but across all the other areas as well.

**Mr. Patrick McDonagh:** The perception some Travellers have is that they or even their

lives matter less than those of settled persons. It is like the social media comments following the Carrickmines disaster. Quite a few were quite pleased they had died in such a tragic way. Obviously, it was horrendous for the families. Speaking myself as a Traveller, there is a clear indication my death in a sense would at least be welcome by some people on that basis alone rather than anything else. That is partly why the law is necessary. Some people would consider it worth glorifying this horrendous tragedy as if it was a good thing now that there are fewer of them. Obviously, that may only be a minority opinion but it is certainly a vocal one, and it is one that finds some political support in Irish society.

**Chairman:** Such hate speech laws are critical to changing that kind of discourse and changing the atmosphere around what other progressive measures might be possible. I welcome Deputy Ó Cuív. Does the Deputy have any questions or comments for the panel? He probably had horrendous journey from Galway.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I came up to Dublin late last night because I had other things to attend to. I have no comments at this stage.

**Chairman:** Deputy Jan O'Sullivan gave us plenty of food for thought. It is good that we have in the Deputy an ally on the Joint Committee on Education and Skills. We are making common cause on specific matters such as the reduced-hours timetable. It is also helpful to have her insights, as a former Minister, on how to move the system.

I thank Dr. Teresa O'Doherty. While it is great to hear of positive initiatives, it is disappointing to note that they are run on goodwill and are not deliberate, mainstream, State-funded efforts. Mr. Patrick McDonagh shared with us very thoughtful insights based on his experience and gave his perspective as a historian, especially on developments around attitudes to Travellers and what has changed and needs to change. He also made very strong recommendations, which the committee will note. I thank all witnesses for their presentations and for dealing with members' questions in such a comprehensive manner. They have given us plenty of ideas for questions to put to Minister and his officials, as well as the representatives of various other bodies who will appear before the committee next week. The witnesses can rest assured that we will raise these points.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.16 p.m. until 11 a.m. Tuesday, 3 December 2019.