

## Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill Briefing



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### **An Bille um Chultúr agus Stair an Lucht Siúil san Oideachas, 2018** **Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018**

#### **Background and Context**

Education is a key means of encouraging social acceptance of diversity, fighting discrimination, and redressing disadvantage. The inclusion of Traveller culture and history within the curricula of Irish primary and post-primary schools is a logical and necessary continuation of the state's historic recognition of Traveller ethnicity in Dáil Éireann in March 2017. The content of this bill is in line with equality and education policies developed by recent Fine Gael- and Fianna Fáil-led governments, as well as with Ireland's international obligations. A report by Department of Education and Skills entitled 'Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy', developed under Mary Hanafin in 2005, recommended that in Irish primary schools: "Traveller culture should be an integral part of the intercultural curriculum and be represented positively in each school".

Similarly, the Department of Justice and Equality's National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 commits to: "develop education resources on Traveller and Roma culture and history for use in primary, post-primary and adult education settings." Including Traveller culture and history in the state-education system specifically responds to the recommendations of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in 2009 that: "Roma [and Traveller] history and culture should be appropriately reflected in the general curriculum [of schools in member states]."

Travellers, as Ireland's most long-term disadvantaged group, experience gross disparities

compared to the general populace in terms of educational attainment. According to a 2017 ESRI report, Travellers are over 50 times more likely to leave school without the Leaving Certificate in comparison to non-Travellers, and only 9% of 25-34 year olds have completed second-level education, compared to 86% nationally.<sup>1</sup> Including Traveller culture and history within the curricula of Irish schools would have a transformative effect on young Travellers' relationship with the education system, recognising and validating their distinct culture, and helping to work against feelings of exclusion and related high drop-out rates and towards greater levels of educational attainment. The potential for the recognition of a minority culture within a school curriculum to improve the educational attainment of minority students was demonstrated by the Te Kotahitanga project in New Zealand, where the adoption of Maori-centred education for over 1000 Maori students in selected schools significantly increased the retention rates and academic results of participants relative to Maori students in other schools, and helped encourage the government to adopt a large-scale education policy on a national level giving a central place to Maori culture and history.<sup>2</sup>

Recognition of Traveller culture and history within the education system would also be beneficial to non-Traveller students and teachers, allowing them to learn about an important element of the rich mosaic of Ireland's cultural heritage. The uniqueness and depth of Traveller culture has led to academic interest in the Traveller way of life over time in the disciplines of anthropology and folklore studies in Ireland and beyond. Learning about aspects of this culture such as the Shelta language, Traveller music, the historical barrel-top way of life, and Travellers' fight for inclusion and dignity would broaden the cultural and historical education of Irish students in a similar way that Black History Month has for students in the UK and the US. It would help counter discriminatory attitudes and negative myths regarding Travellers that exist among non-Travellers. It hardly needs to be demonstrated that these attitudes are all too common in Irish society; according to the National Traveller Survey in 2017 only one in ten non-Travellers said they would employ a Traveller. These myths have caused the perpetuation of a cycle of "victim blaming" as described by psychologist William Ryan, where members of a dominant

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/RS56.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/151351/BES-Ka-Hikitia-Report-FINAL-240615.pdf](https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/151351/BES-Ka-Hikitia-Report-FINAL-240615.pdf)

community see features of the social life of a marginalised community that are the result of poverty and marginalisation as essential features of that community's culture, and use this observation to justify racist attitudes that cause this cycle of poverty, exclusion and marginalisation to be perpetuated.<sup>3</sup>

### **What The Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill will do...**

This bill will amend sections 9 and 30 of Education Act 1998, to state that the Minister shall prescribe that Traveller culture and history be taught in recognised Irish schools. Given that previous government education strategies regarding the Travelling community did not culminate in an implementation plan, such as the 2006 Traveller Education Strategy, the adoption of legislation by the Oireachtas is the best way to ensure that the Department of Education honours its commitment to develop primary and post-primary curricula that include Traveller culture and history as mandatory elements of primary and second-level education. This bill will also allow the Minister to consult with representative bodies, such as the Irish Traveller Movement and other Traveller community groups, to establish in what way Traveller history and culture could be best included in the school curriculum. As community bodies representing a large number of Traveller parents, groups such as the Irish Traveller Movement are legally entitled to participate in the development of elements of the national curriculum covering Traveller culture and history, in recognition of Article 42 of the Constitution which gives parents the primary role in determining their children's education.

### **Why Senators should support this bill**

The failed 1963 Commission on Itinerancy framed decades of state policy that simultaneously refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Traveller way of life, whilst at the same time denying the community the same access to healthcare, education, employment, and housing generally enjoyed by the non-Traveller community. Former Taoiseach Enda Kenny's recognition of the status of Travellers as a distinct ethnic minority in March 2017 could mark the first important step in the establishment of a new kind of relationship between the state and the Travelling community. The shift in state policy signalled by this has the potential to remove barriers faced

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<sup>3</sup> Ryan, William *Blaming the Victim* , New York: Pantheon, 1971

by Travellers in accessing these basic services, as well as recognising the uniqueness and legitimacy of Travellers' distinct culture. Teaching Traveller culture and history within the state-education system is a key step towards achieving these two related goals.

**Members of Seanad Éireann should support The Traveller Culture and History in Education bill as it will:**

- 1. Implement existing government policy.** Including Traveller Culture and History within school curricula honours commitments made in policy guidelines issued by the Department of Education and Skills in 2005, and the Department of Justice and Equality in 2017.
- 2. Meet Ireland's international obligations.** The bill brings Ireland into line with its international commitments regarding Traveller education, conforming with recommendations issued by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, in 1989, 2000, and 2009, and with the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed in 1989.
- 3. Give Travellers a real stake in the education system.** Similar initiatives in other countries, such as New Zealand, have demonstrated that curricula inclusive of minority groups' culture and history can reverse the trend of high school dropout rates among such groups, especially at second level, and improve educational attainment in general.
- 4. Enrich the education system for all students.** Irish students and teachers, Travellers and the general population, will benefit from learning about the rich heritage of Traveller language, music, oral culture, nomadic lifestyle and community activism.
- 5. Combat one of Ireland's most shameful and widespread forms of discrimination.** This bill will ultimately help to realise the An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar's aspirational statement upon his election that "prejudice has no hold in this Republic."