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The rainbow shamrock

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THEMATIC ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on article 28 (right to education), article 29 (goals of education) and article 30 (children from minority or indigenous groups) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and their implementation in the several national policies of Western Europe, especially the UK and Ireland, and to a lesser extent, France. The present research looked more particularly into the situation of children from two communities: Gypsy, Roma and Travellers (referred to as GRT) and Irish Travellers. Although they are from different backgrounds, the analysis proved relevant because of the bridges that exist between their cultures and lifestyles, and because of their minority status within larger dominant communities, placing their children in the frontline of the UNCRC battle. The text of the UNCRC itself was a starting point. The research was mainly based on a series of reports from governments, from organizations such as the Traveller Movement, on articles from newspapers, and testimonies from GRT children and Irish Travellers. The results showed that the implementation of articles 28 to 30 of the UNCRC was being by and large slowly carried out by the countries under study. Yet, national disparities were evident. Also, their national policies revealed different contexts. Ireland seemed to be paving the way for the inclusion of minorities within the educational system.

KEYWORDS

educational environment, school curriculum, academic achievement, social history, bullying, inclusive education, exclusion, drop-out, underrepresentation, self-esteem

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INTRODUCTION

In February 2007, the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) issued a report entitled “The Glass Box. Exclusion of Roma from employment.” The research teams in charge of it worked within the wider context of a program called “Advocacy Action in Favour of the Promotion of the Integration of Roma in Education and Employment”, funded by the European Union (E.U) to combat discrimination in these fields. The report aimed to give policymakers a better understanding of the scope of the discrimination against Roma in five Central and Eastern European countries – Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia – in order to better act against it. For example, the research teams conducted a series of interviews of what the United Nations International Labour Office (ILO) calls the “Labour Market Gatekeepers [...] people responsible for facilitating a connection between the supply side and the demand side of the labour market.”¹ The results showed that these labour office officials themselves fostered the exclusion of Roma from the labour market. In order to advocate more equality in the workforce, and trigger a change in discriminatory practices, it was vital, the report said, “to obtain statistical data on the composition of the workforce.”² On the job market, important actors seemed to be hiding behind the ban on ethnic statistics:

... multinational companies from Western Europe and the USA, with branch offices in Central and Southeastern Europe, where the law will have required them to observe and monitor employment equality policies seem content to hide behind the misconception that in Central and Southeastern Europe it is illegal to monitor the ethnic diversity of their workforce.³

Two states have decided to take the first step in monitoring companies operating on their soil: Hungary and the United Kingdom have indeed been praised for their policy makers’ decisions to allow for access to statistical data. Quoting Ariane Hegewisch from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (*Equal Opportunities Policies and Development in Human Resource Management: A Comparative European Analysis*, 1992), the 2007 ERRC report added that the UK and the Netherlands are the European countries with the longest and most efficient history of regulations against, and surveillance of, discrimination based on ethnicity in the workplace. The UK Race Relations (Amendment) Act was passed in 2000, and was later incorporated into the Equality Act passed in 2010 by the Brown ministry. In theory, it guarantees racial equality for all and requires public authorities, including Universities, to promote it. The ERRC 2007 report compared the situation of Roma with that of Catholics in Northern Ireland, victims of similar stereotypes which prevented their social mobility.⁴ The solution came from the international community which pressured Northern Ireland to comply with European regulations concerning fair access to education and the job market. Yet, fair access to the marketplace for all, advocated by a variety of actors such as The Council of Europe, NGOs, governments, and activists, will only be completed when access to education is insured in the first place. The Gypsy, Roma and Traveller

¹European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) (February 2007). “The Glass Box. Exclusion of Roma from employment.” Profiles of the Labour Market Actors in this Research (page 19).

²Ibid. Equality Policies: Examples of Good Practice Outside Central and South Eastern Europe (page 63).

³European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) (February 2007). Road Untravelled: From Prohibition of Discrimination to Promoting (page 51).

⁴European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) (February 2007). “The Glass Box. Exclusion of Roma from employment.” m00000214.pdf (errc.org) (retrieved 7 January 2021).



communities themselves often mention their lack of qualifications as an impediment to their social mobility. The NGO Roma Support Group, based in England and Wales, published a report in 2016 in which interviewees pointed out that their lack of skills, such as proficiency in English, excluded them de facto from the marketplace, putting them in a position of high-risk vulnerability (namely rough sleeping and begging): “87% of all interviewees were clear that with limited qualifications and limited English it had become difficult to find work on their own.”⁵ In 2017, BBC News published an article by Rhiannon Beacham about Rose Probert, a Traveller woman who achieved a post-graduate certificate and had been rewarded in the 2016 Inspire! Awards. The author wrote that “According to the 2011 Census, 62% of Gypsies and Travellers in Wales had no qualifications and 7% had a Level Four qualification, such as a Bachelor’s degree or higher.”⁶ Rhiannon Beacham gave the reason for it: “I come from a Gypsy and traveller community so, obviously, education is very rare in that ethnic minority community.”⁷ This stands in radical contradiction to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) – more particularly article 28 (right to education), article 29 (goals of education) and article 30 (children from minority or indigenous groups) – which the UK ratified with reservations in December 1991, then without reservations in September 2008. Ireland had ratified it without reservations as early as 1992. The text of the UNCRC might be thirty-years-old, yet it arose out of decades of reflective thoughts in the matter, as reminded in its preamble. It began with the *World Child Welfare Charter*, drafted by Eglantyne Jebb (1876–1928), a British social reformer, and adopted by the League of Nations in 1924, followed by the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, adopted by the United Nations in 1959. So why are little Rose Proberts still excluded from the educational system? What is wrong with GRT education in western countries? What is, or should be done, to turn the “The Chimera of Equal Opportunity Policies”⁸ into reality?

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

According to the UNCRC, “the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society.”⁹ Education being one of the main pillars of this individual construction, article 28 naturally stresses the importance of the right to an education for every child. UNICEF UK issued a summary of the article in question, which reads as such:

Every child has the right to an education. Primary education must be free and different forms of secondary education must be available to every child. Discipline in schools must respect children’s dignity and their rights. Richer countries must help poorer countries achieve this.¹⁰

⁵RSG/St Mungo’s/City of Westminster (June 2016). “Rough sleeping Roma in the City of Westminster.” Rough-sleeping-Roma-in-the-City-of-Westminster.pdf (retrieved 8 January 2021).

⁶Beacham, R. (3 September 2017). BBC News. Gypsy women breaking education barriers with uni degrees. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-40728470> (retrieved 8 January 2021).

⁷Ibid.

⁸European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) (February 2007). Road Untravelled: From Prohibition of Discrimination to Promoting Equality (page 51).

⁹The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Preamble. [unicef-convention-rights-child-uncrc.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/convention-rights-child-uncrc/pdf) (retrieved 8 January 2021).

¹⁰A Summary of the UNCRC. Unicef. United Kingdom. [UNCRC_summary-1_1.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/uncrc/summary-1-1.pdf) (retrieved 8 January 2021).



Article 29 underlines the goal of education: “Education must develop every child’s personality, talents and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child’s respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures, and the environment.”¹¹ Finally, article 30 highlights the rights of children from minority or indigenous groups: “Every child has the right to learn and use the language, customs and religion of their family, whether or not these are shared by the majority of the people in the country where they live.”¹² Yet, the right for education of GRT children living in the UK, as well as the goal of [their] education and their equal rights as a minority are trampled upon. In 1999, the ERRC wrote:

There is no lack of aspiration from Gypsy and Traveller parents for their children, but, for some, formal education is not seen as a part of those aspirations. This means that it is too easy for the education system to write off the potential of Gypsy and Traveller children, enabling prejudice to continue. The ability to access high-quality education sets the course for the future success of every young person. In the case of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people, a poor start in education may be the catalyst for many other inequalities that we have heard about throughout this inquiry. As we have heard in evidence, the barriers for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in education are severe. Tackling poor educational attainment is vital to tackling other inequalities facing the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.¹³

This is shown by a dizzying ocean of statistics, which in spite of the dizziness can pave the way for actions to be taken.

Absenteeism

On 4 October 2020, *The Guardian* published an article entitled “Why are schools still such hostile places for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children?”¹⁴ The author spoke about and for “young people from [her] background.” Their feelings she had experienced before, being “ostracized” as they are. “Hostile” and “ostracized”, the words sounded harsh, and utterly inappropriate for the educational environment. Her point of entry in tackling the subject was the level of absenteeism of GRT children, which was the second highest of all ethnic groups in the UK, behind that of Irish Travellers. She was interpreting data from a government study, which had just been published (2019), and whose statistics were indeed “staggering”. The rate of absentee Chinese children, who had the lowest overall absence rate, was 2.5%; Indian children, 3.7%; those of Black Caribbean, as well as White British children, around 5%, and that of White Irish, 5.7%. It skyrocketed up to 13% when it came to Gypsy/Roma children and 18.8% to children of Irish Travellers.¹⁵

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³ERRC (7 December 1999). *Roma evicted from sites in Wales; Traveller education dealt blow in Britain*. <http://www.errc.org/roma-rights-journal/roma-evicted-from-site-in-wales;-traveller-education-dealt-blow-in-britain> (retrieved 8 January 2021).

¹⁴O’Neill, G.C. (2020). Why are schools still such hostile places for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children? *The Guardian*. Why are schools still such hostile places for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children? | Grace Claire O’Neill | Opinion | The Guardian (retrieved 5 January 2021).

¹⁵GOV.UK. “Ethnicity facts and figures. Absence from schools.” Absence from school – GOV.UK Ethnicity facts and figures (ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk) (retrieved 5 January 2021).



School exclusion

In 2017, King's College London commissioned a report entitled "The underrepresentation of GRT pupils in higher education. A report on barriers from early years to secondary and beyond." Once again, the results were edifying: "GRT pupils are five times as likely as their peers to be permanently excluded,"¹⁶ namely from 0.1% to 0.5%. When it came to the percentage of pupils with at least one fixed period exclusion, the rate of GRT children was four times higher than the national average, from 2.2% to 8% (Gypsy/Roma) and 8.2% (Travellers), the next highest fixed term exclusion rate being that of Black Caribbean children at 5.7%. In its 2019 study, the British government estimated the temporary exclusion rate in the 2017 to 2018 school year at 16.52% for Gypsy/Roma children and 17.42% for Irish Travellers, whereas it was estimated at around 10% for Black Caribbean, 5.70% for White British, 5% for White Irish, and 0.50% for Chinese children. Perry Ogdén 2005 documentary entitled *Pavee Lackeen: The Traveller girl*¹⁷ shows how Winnie Maughan, a Irish Traveller girl is the one being sent to the head teacher's office after responding to another pupil's provocation; she then gets a one-week exclusion to *think things over*. This totally betrays the spirit and text of article 28 of the UNCRC stating, "Discipline in schools must respect children's dignity and their rights."

Educational attainment, drop-out rate & underrepresentation

In primary and secondary schools, the gap in achievement in national tests and assessments between GRT children and Irish Travellers on the one hand, and the rest of the population on the other was disturbing. In its 2019 report on Gypsies and Travellers in the educational system, the House of Commons wrote that the level of achievement was three to five times lower for GRT children:

In 2018, 64% of all pupils reached the expected standard in all of English reading, writing and mathematics. Of children identified as Gypsy/Roma, 18% met the expected standard. For those identified as travellers of Irish heritage, the figure was 22%.¹⁸ At the end of Key Stage 4, secondary level, in 2018, 19% of state-funded school pupils identified as Irish Traveller attained GCSEs¹⁹ in

¹⁶Mulcahy, E., Baars, S., Bowen-Viner, K., Menzies, L. (July 2017). King's College London. *The underrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education*. A report on barriers from early years to secondary and beyond KINGWIDE_28494_FINAL.pdf (cfey.org) (retrieved 11 January).

¹⁷Ogdén, P. (2005). *Pavee Lackeen: The Traveller girl*. Pierre Grise Distribution.

¹⁸Author's note. These were the statistics at the end of key Stage 2 (pupils aged 7–11 years). Here, children of Irish heritage performed the best within the White British group with a rate of achievement at 70%. Indian (76%) and Chinese children (81%) are the best performers of all pupils. Disadvantaged pupils ("include those eligible for Free School Meals or FSM in the last 6 years, or are looked after children, or are adopted children from care") still had a level of achievement two to three times higher (51%) than that of GRT children and children of Irish Travellers. Yet, readers should not lose sight of the scope of the study: while a total of 619,350 eligible pupils (pupils who have actually reached the end of Key Stage 2 in all of reading, writing and maths) were evaluated, 416,127 were of white British heritage; the figures dropped to 190,524 regarding disadvantaged pupils, 2,160 when it came to GRT children, 1,690 for children of Irish heritage, and 472 for children Irish Travellers.

¹⁹Author's note. General Certificate of Secondary Education: school qualification in a particular subject in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.



English and Maths at grade 4/C²⁰ or above. The figure for pupils identified as Gypsy/Roma was 13%. Nationally, 64% of state-funded school pupils attained these qualifications.^{21,22}

The Centre for Education and Youth (CFEY) is a “think and action-tank” which believes “society should ensure all children and young people receive the support they need to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood”,²³ a self-description echoing the initial statement of the UNCRC (“the child should be fully prepared to live an individual life in society”²⁴). Drawing upon research conducted by the CFEY, Grace Claire O’Neill bluntly noted that “Gypsies and Travellers are 10 times less likely to go to university than their peers.”²⁵ The CFEY itself based its research on the 2017 report by the King’s College London (KCL), which stated that “3–4% of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers aged 18–30 accessed Higher Education in 2014, compared to 43% of 18–30 year-olds in the national population”, and that “9 out of 10 GRT pupils leave school without five good GCSEs; fewer than 10% of Gypsy/Roma pupils and fewer than 20% of Irish Traveller pupils achieve 5 GCSEs graded A* - C,²⁶ compared to approximately 60% of all pupils nationally”,²⁷ once again showing the huge disparities in education between the children belonging to these communities, and unveiling the failure of British policy in educational matters thirty years after the British ratification of the UNCRC. Ellie Mulcahy, one of the authors of the study, appeared on live TV in a programme called BBC breakfast where she explained that it was important to realize that GRT children are not failing because their parents “are not valuing education”, or because “they isolate themselves purposefully”, or because they do not wish their children to be successful from an academic point of view, as it is the case with other groups in Britain, but because of “their extreme discrimination prejudice.” Sitting next to her, Lisa Galloway, of Traveller background, considered GRT children in Blackpool to have been “disengaged” from school. The 2017 report commissioned by KCL indeed illustrated this disengagement:

²⁰From 2017, English pupils are graded from U (ungraded/unclassified: no certificate or qualification awarded) and if awarded a qualification, from 1 to 9, the latter being the best level of achievement. It has also been the case in Wales. These correspond more or less to the G-A Northern Irish system.

²¹Author’s note. These are the statistics at the end of key Stage 4 (pupils aged between 14 and 15). In the school year 2016–2017, those figures had been respectively 22% (children Irish Travellers) and 10.7% (GRT children). Over the period 2010–2017, a steady increase in the level of achievement was to be seen: from 58.7% to 64% for all pupils; 55%–60% for Black children. 62.2%–68.9% for Asian children. Furthermore, GRT are the only group whose evolution seems to be clearly chaotic from one year to another. It also experienced the lesser evolution, from 11.1% to 13%.

²²Cromarty, H. (9 May 2019). House of Commons Library. *Briefing Paper: Gypsies and Travellers*. G&T House of Commons.pdf (retrieved 8 January).

²³CFEY. <https://cfey.org/>(retrieved 11 January).

²⁴The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Preamble. [unicef-convention-rights-child-uncrc.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/convention-rights-child-uncrc/pdf) (retrieved 11 January 2021).

²⁵O’Neill, G.C. (2020). Why are schools still such hostile places for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children? *The Guardian*. [Why are schools still such hostile places for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children? | Grace Claire O’Neill | Opinion | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/opinion/2020/sep/16/why-are-schools-still-such-hostile-places-for-gypsy-roma-and-traveller-children) (retrieved 11 January 2021).

²⁶See note 22.

²⁷Mulcahy, E., Baars, S., Bowen-Viner, K., Menzies, L. (July 2017). King’s College London. *The underrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education*. A report on barriers from early years to secondary and beyond [KINGWIDE_28494_FINAL.pdf](https://www.kcl.ac.uk/assets/_data/asset_store/28494/KINGWIDE_28494_FINAL.pdf) (cfey.org) (retrieved 11 January).



Research estimated that in 2003, only 80% of GRT pupils transferred to secondary GRT pupils transferred to secondary, around 50% drop-out by the age of 16 and only 37% complete the full five years of secondary education [...] While official figures indicate around 80% of GRT pupils of secondary age are attending school, some research suggests that there are over 12,000 GRT pupils not enrolled in any secondary school and in some parts of the country such as Scotland and remote areas, attendance may be as low as 20%.²⁸

Bullying

It appears as though GRT children and the rest of the population are living parallel childhoods in the British schools. One of the reasons given is often the scope of bullying of the former by the latter. The institution itself carries out bullying sometimes. A revealing example of this was Winnie Maughan's one-week exclusion from school.²⁹ In 2017, The Traveller Movement issued a three-page information guide, echoing article 28 of the UNCRC about child's dignity:

Any decision to exclude a pupil from school must be 'lawful, reasonable and fair'. If you think the decision is not lawful, reasonable or fair, you can appeal and ask the school to reconsider the exclusion. It is unlawful for a school to treat a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller pupil less favourably in comparison to other pupils with the same sort of behaviour.³⁰

The guide was divided into two sections: temporary and permanent exclusion. In the former, one paragraph reads as such: "Schools are not allowed to send pupils home 'to cool off' - this must be treated as exclusion. Every time your child is sent out of school, the school must tell you in writing why and for how long."³¹ Ellie Mulcahy of CFEY, in the 2017 KCL report, wrote:

The majority of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils experience discrimination and bullying in schools. They then fear that this will continue in higher education and will not be treated seriously. Therefore, universities need to demonstrate that discrimination and bullying will not be tolerated and address it promptly and effectively if it does occur.³²

The report added that "Rumours of student 'pikie parties' and prejudicial language used by university staff put some potential students off."³³ In 2020, a series of interviews were carried out by The Traveller Movement about bullying and a report entitled "Barriers in education – young Travellers in London" was then produced by the Greater London Authority's Citizen Led Engagement project. A short film was made, summarizing some of the issues which had been raised: "Experiencing bullying at school is more of a norm than an exception for young Travellers in London. Shockingly, 67% say that they have been bullied or picked on by teachers

²⁸Mulcahy, E., Baars, S., Bowen-Viner, K., Menzies, L. (July 2017). King's College London. *The underrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education*. A report on barriers from early years to secondary and beyond KINGWIDE_28494_FINAL.pdf (cfey.org) (retrieved 11 January).

²⁹See note 19.

³⁰The Traveller Movement (2017). *School exclusions*. TM's Equality and Social Justice Unit, access to justice series, information guide. TTM_School_exclusions.pdf (travellermovement.org.uk) (retrieved 4 March 2021).

³¹Ibid.

³²CFEY. *Progression to University by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Pupils - CfEY* (retrieved 11 January 2011).

³³Ibid.



because they are Travellers”; “40% were bullied by other pupils”; “36% of young Travellers leave school early because of bullying.”³⁴ Here is a selection of the testimonies of the forty-four 15 – 25-year-old Travellers interviewed:

They told I would never achieve anything [...] and told me I'd cheated when I got good grades.

In primary school, I've been pushed over twice so I ended up with a scar under my chin.

I was called smelly pikey and trailer tramp. I was scared to tell anyone, so I kept it to myself for years.

Hiding one's identity is sadly felt like part of the Traveller's "survival" gear, as Senator [Eileen Flynn](#), the first Traveller woman in the [Oireachtas](#), told the *Irish Times* in July 2020.³⁵ Other stories described the Traveller identity as shameful:

After almost 20 years covering the Traveller community, a story heard repeatedly has been of Traveller children hiding their identity.

One told here before, is that of the son of [Mags Casey](#), a young Traveller mother in [Tipperary](#) who spoke to *The Irish Times* 10 years ago, about the "shame" her then 11 year-old son felt about being a Traveller.

"It's a curse to be a Traveller, Mommy," he said. When she told him his identity was something to be proud of, he protested: "Mommy it's not. You're afraid if the neighbours find out we're Travellers. You're hiding it. It is a curse, Mommy."

Another story is that of a school principal reassuring a Traveller mother that her children were not being bullied in the school. "No-one knows they're Travellers. I've made sure of it."³⁶

In the 2020 report by the Traveller Movement, 45% of interviewees pointed out bullying as the reason *for leaving school*. 58% of the girls and 26% of the boys said other pupils had bullied them. 74% of the girls, and 61% of the boys said they had been "bullied by teachers because of their ethnicity/because they are Travellers."³⁷

CONCLUSION: RESTORING TRUST

According to Ellie Mulcahy, one of the solutions to prevent GRT children from being excluded from the school system would be "Working with these children as individuals and working with the families in gaining trust."³⁸ According to one interviewee of the Traveller Movement, GRT children wish for inclusive education: "Don't separate us and make us feel different", they say. In

³⁴The Traveller Movement (2020). Barriers in education – young Travellers in London. TTM Barriers in education_web.pdf (travellermovement.org.uk) (retrieved 11 January).

³⁵Holland, K. (3 July 2020). *The Irish Times*. 'Feeling that rejection in society, it's horrible,' says first Traveller woman in Oireachtas (irishtimes.com) (retrieved 11 January 2020).

³⁶Holland, K. (2 March 2017). *The Irish Times*. Ethnic recognition a momentous step for Irish Travellers (irishtimes.com) (retrieved 11 January 2021).

³⁷The Traveller Movement (2020). Barriers in education – young Travellers in London. TTM Barriers in education_web.pdf (travellermovement.org.uk) (retrieved 11 January).

³⁸CFEY. *BBC Breakfast* (8 juillet 2017). Progression to University by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Pupils - CFEY (extrait le 11 janvier 2021).



France, the Department of Education adopted a series of measures which can contribute to this. For example, schools are required to provide all administrative documents in the language of a newly arrived family. On its national website, school rules, school trips documentation, school report books, etc. already exist in many languages (Romany, Albanian, Chinese, Turkish. . .), and in case they do not, schools are required by law to translate the document in the language of the family in need of such a document. Also, reforms that were carried out in this country in the past few years have highlighted the importance of multilingualism in the process of learning and how it allows for the inclusion of every child in education, thus meeting the UNCRC requirements, especially those to be found in article 30: "Every child has the right to learn and use the language, customs and religion of their family, whether or not these are shared by the majority of the people in the country where they live." Thus, France seems to be turning its back to the controversial and high-profile 2013 Dibrani case (known in France as the *Affaire Leonarda*), which broke out when Leonarda Dibrani, a fifteen-year-old illegal Kosovo Roma schoolgirl was arrested during a school trip. Travellers interviewed by the Traveller Movement pointed out that the best way to restore faith in the school system and the feeling that they belong at school would be to bring changes to the curriculum, such as adding "Traveller history in the curriculum".³⁹ To the question *How to make school better?* 32% answered, "don't treat us differently", and 12% "schools should teach about our culture".⁴⁰ The first country to take a step in this direction was Ireland, a country in whose schools Irish Travellers also feel rejected from, as they do in the United Kingdom. In 2018, Richard Bruton, the Irish Minister for Education, announced that following the 2017 Government decision to recognise the ethnicity of the Traveller community, "Traveller culture and history [was] set to feature on the curriculum for primary and secondary schools."⁴¹ Mr Bruton added: "Traveller retention rates remain stubbornly low. That must change. I want more children from the Traveller community to progress in education at all levels." The discourse was consistent with the UNCRC, as well as being very ambitious, hoping to make Ireland the leading European country in the matter of inclusion of children of minorities in the school system:

Mr Bruton said there were initiatives underway to help boost the inclusion of Travellers and members of the Roma community in the education system, including a Tusla-led pilot project to target attendance, participation and school completion. "The Government's ambition is to make the Irish education and training service the best in Europe within a decade," he said. "We must find ways to be the best at integrating those from minority groups, and other cultures, into our society."⁴²

According to *The Irish Times*, a question remained: *what could the lessons look like?* "Folktales, songs, art and the history of the Travelling community could feature across a range of subjects", the journalist wrote.⁴³ Patrick McDonagh, is a Traveller and a PhD student at Trinity College. He can think of a few things that may be involved in the new curriculum.

³⁹The Traveller Movement (2020). Barriers in education – young Travellers in London. TTM Barriers in education_web.pdf (travellermovement.org.uk) (retrieved 11 January).

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹O'Brien, C. (27 September 2018). *The Irish Times*. Traveller culture and history set to feature on school curriculum (irishtimes.com) (retrieved 11 January 2021).

⁴²Ibid. 41.

⁴³McGuire, P. (14 January 2020). *The Irish Times*. Traveller culture is set to join the school curriculum. What could lessons look like? (irishtimes.com) (retrieved 11 January 2021).



Travellers have a distinct language, De Gammon, and this sets us apart as indeed language does for any community. There is also a tradition of piping and music, tin-making and, of course, storytelling. But it is hard to learn your history if nobody is teaching it.⁴⁴

Dr [Sindy Joyce](#), a sociology lecturer, was the first Traveller in Ireland to graduate with a PhD. To her, the new curriculum should investigate the History of the Traveller minority, who has been criminalized:

“Every part of Mincéiri [Traveller] culture has nearly been criminalised,” she says, “The 1963 report of the Commission on Itinerancy pushed for us to be permanently settled. The issues we face are the same as those of other indigenous groups across the world, including the Australian Aboriginals, and the curriculum should explore these [. . .] “I’d hope it would look at the contribution of Mincéiri in the World Wars, the Easter Rising and the Civil War. During the Rising, Travellers used their wagons to smuggle guns.”⁴⁵

The article also stressed the Travellers’ contribution in music:

[Tom Munnely](#), who worked with the [National Folklore Commission](#) collected songs from Travellers but later transitioned to gather stories and information on folk medicine. He recorded tales from a man in Roscommon called McDonagh.⁴⁶

He indeed recorded Traveller songs from 1967 to 1975 which were released in 1983 as a collection entitled *Songs of the Irish Travellers*. Score number 2 is called *Bernie Reilly’s Cant Song* and could allow children to discover the Shelta, or De Gammon, language, which is part of the Irish national heritage. Dr Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, head of the UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore, added that “With Travellers slower to get televisions and radios, they preserved a treasure trove of songs including *The Well Below the Valley*, which [Christy Moore](#) went on to record, and *Raggle Taggle Gypsy* which Tom recorded from [John Reilly](#) in Boyle.”⁴⁷ Even if the benefit of the updated curriculum “will only be felt in 15 or 20 years’ time,” Patrick McDonagh told *The Irish Times*, it will also change the image the public retain of the Traveller community: “I hope that this change will lead people to see that we are not failures or drop-outs.”⁴⁸ Eventually, Oein DeBharduin, a *Traveller author*, mentioned a few things that could be included in the curriculum. Especially carpentry, folklore and the language:

“Mincéiri art, our contribution to Irish music, animal care, our folklore and our historical lore could be included in various subjects,” he says.

“Here is a carpentry style Travellers have used. In animal care, it could be about the types of horses bred by Travellers. In music, it could be songs recorded from Travellers and our knowledge of the uilleann pipes. The curriculum could talk about aspects of our language that are similar to Latin.

⁴⁴McGuire, P. (14 January 2020). *The Irish Times*. Traveller culture is set to join the school curriculum. What could lessons look like? ([irishtimes.com](https://www.irishtimes.com)) (retrieved 11 January 2021).

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷McGuire, P. (14 January 2020). *The Irish Times*. Traveller culture is set to join the school curriculum. What could lessons look like? ([irishtimes.com](https://www.irishtimes.com)) (retrieved 11 January 2021).

⁴⁸Ibid.



And it could explain that we are not a monoculture: there is diversity within the Mincéiri community. There's so much that could be covered – we don't have to reach too far for examples.⁴⁹

To Lisa Galloway (BBC Breakfast, 2017), Traveller children in Britain do not understand the aim of the national education in its current form, and thus do not *take part in their learning* (by the way one of the pillars of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or CEFR, set up by the Council of Europe in the 1990s and recommended since 2001); to invert the exclusion of Traveller children from the school system and to foster their integration, the curriculum would need to depart from pure academic knowledge to a more skilled-based curriculum: “Why do we value curriculum-based education, over life skill vocational education?”⁵⁰ Yet, in England too, the English Gypsy Travellers would have much to offer to a revisited curriculum. It could show how Travellers contributed to the entertainment industry. Books written by English Travellers such as *The Stopping Places* by Damian Le Bas (2018, Vintage) could be studied. Romany football players such as Rabbi Howell, or the long tradition of Romany boxers (shown in the TV series *Peaky Blinders*) would be other options for the teachers. In fact, there's every reason to follow the Irish path to a rainbow shamrock, in Britain or elsewhere in Europe, because it would not only help restore Traveller children's self-esteem, and thus follow the UNCRC requirements to “develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full” (article 30), but also, as Dr Sindy Joyce predicted, everyone would benefit from it:

“When children learn about different cultures and identities, it brings more empathy to society,” she says. “Teachers will need diversity training. It won't change things overnight.”⁵¹

Dr Joyce's comment on teachers' training echoed the work of other searchers who have brought into focus the negative attitudes of teachers towards GRT pupils in England, destructive of their self-esteem. This is the case of Kalwant Bhopal, who conducted a series of interviews of teachers in an inner-London borough for the *British Educational Research Journal*. One of them was of a Mrs Brown, whose part of the answer became the title of Bhopal's article:

Mrs Brown, also a teacher at Sandown secondary school (who taught 12-year-old pupils), felt the Gypsy and Traveller children did not know how to deal with authority:

I think they want us to allow them to do whatever they want to do and we can't and won't let them do that. This is a school, it's not a site. We have rules and a structure here and everyone has to go with it.⁵²

Bhopal argued that such an attitude tended to maintain “the boundaries of society”. She added that “This also takes place through the implementation of school policies, which are designed to fit the needs of the majority population rather than the minority.”⁵³ It thus makes it

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰CFEY. BBC Breakfast (8 juillet 2017). *Progression to University by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Pupils - CfEY* (extrait le 11 janvier 2021).

⁵¹McGuire, P. (14 January 2020). *The Irish Times*. Traveller culture is set to join the school curriculum. What could lessons look like? ([irishtimes.com](https://www.irishtimes.com)) (retrieved 11 January 2021).

⁵²Bhopal, K (June 2011). *'This is a school, it's not a site': teachers' attitudes towards Gypsy and Traveller pupils in schools in England*. *British Educational Research Journal*. Vol. 37, No. 3 (pp. 465–483). Wiley on behalf of BERA.

⁵³Ibid.



impossible for the trust in the school system to be restored, which constitutes one of the tenets of the implementation of the UNCRC, alongside States' legislation and in some extreme cases, pressure from the international community. Without this trust, GRT children and children of Irish Travellers would continue experiencing the trauma of being excluded from the school system, such as was the case with Grace Claire O'Neill and Winnie Maughan or Damian Le Bas, who also resorted to hiding his ethnic (and cultural) identity. This hostility stands in complete contradiction with articles 28, 29 and 30 of the UNCRC. It is also of paramount importance for the actors to listen to what GRT children and children of Irish Travellers have to say, since bullying rarely comes with statistics: testimonies are of essence. Eventually, "Never giving up on them,"⁵⁴ is a matter of social cohesion. Step by step, it can indeed alleviate the vulnerability of minorities which is in large part a consequence of a lack of qualifications, deeply rooted in primary and secondary schools. By revising his curriculum to include Traveller culture, now doubt Ireland has started restoring this faith and turning *the chimera of equal opportunity policies* into reality. This is yet probably just the beginning.

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⁵⁴The Traveller Movement (March 2016). *Never Giving Up On Them*. School exclusions of Gypsy, Traveller and Roma pupils in England. [Never Giving Up On Them.pdf \(travellermovement.org.uk\)](http://travellermovement.org.uk) (retrieved 4 March).



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