



Exploring Barriers to Education for Traveller Children in the North Cork Region and identifying Local Solutions to address these barriers.

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## Executive Summary

This research was commissioned by Travellers of North Cork to identify the barriers to educational progression for Traveller children attending school in the North Cork region. Travellers have experienced disadvantages in all aspects of their lives for generations, and in particular, they have experienced inequity in education. Although various government policies and strategies have been developed over many decades, educational outcomes for members of the Traveller Community have not seen significant improvement. This study explores the barriers to education for Traveller children from their parents' perspectives.

A small cohort of Traveller parents participated in focus group discussion and shared their experiences of the barriers to education for their children. The parents gave in-depth insights into their children's experiences. The emergent themes informed a questionnaire and interviews were conducted with education practitioners in schools in the region. The overarching theme is discrimination as this occurs daily, both directly and indirectly in various ways. For instance, there is a limit to the number of Special Educational Needs assessments available to the schools, therefore they have to be 'used wisely', in which case Traveller children are often left behind. Examples were given whereby children are transitioning through primary school without assessment, placed on reduced timetables and some have been threatened with exclusion. It was also reported that children have arrived in secondary school 'not knowing the alphabet'. Discrimination is also highlighted in the teacher-child relationship as participants spoke of their children's well-being and happiness in school is very much dependent on the teacher's attitude towards Traveller children. Technology is also a barrier identified by parents as some have low levels of digital literacy and schools use Apps to disseminate homework and other vital information. Some schools address this by giving parents paper copies of any materials they need. Other emergent themes were inclusion and exclusion, where parents and educators reported incidents of children being segregated and excluded. There are also examples where

some education practitioners create inclusive environments, supporting children and parents, and celebrating Traveller culture in the school.

Financial barriers are also a concern as well as lack of support for children progressing to Leaving Certificate with aspirations to progress to further and higher education. The parent's past experiences of school were drawn on in many discussions during the focus group sessions, therefore the intergenerational experiences emerged as an important theme as past experiences provide a lens for which parents view their children's education. The discussions conjure up memories for the parents and give accounts of the trauma and humiliation they were subjected to. The parents want to protect their children from hostile environments while also wanting them to progress in education and have brighter futures than they themselves had. They talk of discrimination in everyday life as a norm as they can experience it 'ten times a day'. One of the most fundamental rights for any human being is respect. The parents want to be respected and for their children to be respected in the education system so that they can have the same opportunities as their settled peers. One participant said they want to be treated like 'humans' like everyone else.

The education practitioners that engaged in the research are clearly doing their best with the resources available to them to support Traveller children. One school that the parents also discussed is a model of good practice that other schools would do well to follow. This school has engaged in Traveller Culture Awareness Training and the Yellow Flag Programme, promoting equality and diversity and creating an inclusive environment for both children and their parents. Other educators are doing what they can in different contexts, but all those who took part in the interviews have the interest of the child at heart. One participant explained that 'it's the system that is wrong', and it is like 'trying to stick a square peg into a round hole'. It is the system that needs to change, not the Traveller children.

To improve overall educational outcomes and increase progression rates to Further and Higher education, it is necessary to address barriers at primary and secondary levels.

## Key findings

### The study has highlighted

- There is a scarcity of psychological assessments in primary schools
- The lack of Traveller Cultural Awareness Training in Schools and Yellow Flag - Schools are not inclusive environments and children feel the teachers do not like them
- The lack of Traveller Culture in the curriculum – children should be taught about Traveller culture from an early age
- The lack of Traveller Culture in Teacher Training Colleges – Trauma informed practice and Traveller Culture Awareness should be included in Teacher training
- Discrimination in schools and in everyday life leads to parents masking their children's Traveller identity to protect them from the trauma and humiliation they experienced.
- Some schools are still segregating children into Traveller only classrooms which one would have thought was a thing of the past.
- Traveller grants are not always being used for Traveller education
- Travellers continuously face barriers in daily life, as negative stereotypes are pervasive in Irish society.
- Low expectations of Traveller children in schools, perpetuate the barriers to progression from one level to the next – from primary to secondary, from Junior to Leaving and then to further and higher education.
- Barriers to progression due to lack of support and guidance for secondary school children, such as fees for pre-exams and support with CAO forms
- Schools that acknowledge and celebrate Traveller Culture are welcoming environments and should be highlighted as models of good practice for other schools to follow

## 1. Introduction

This research aims to explore the structural barriers to education for Traveller children in the North Cork region, and to seek ways to combat them, to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for Traveller children. The Traveller Community have been historically marginalised in education, as well as all the other areas of society, and have been subjected to experiences of trauma, shame and humiliation, which are pervasive and intergenerational. Principal two of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (unsdg.org) aims to 'leave no one behind' and promises to 'end discrimination and exclusion' by 2030. Members of the Traveller Community in Ireland have been left behind in education for generations, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and inequality. While some efforts have been made to improve outcomes, progression rates to further and higher education remain low. According to the *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy*, "[t]he role and function of all the school community and in particular teachers is of paramount importance in the education process. The contribution made by the school community and the teaching profession to the educational development of the Traveller community is acknowledged, and there have been many success stories" (gov.ie, 2006:10). However, schools are not always welcoming places for Travellers, therefore it is difficult for parents to have trust in the education system. It is important that children feel a sense of belonging in the school system and in all areas of life. This research will illustrate how principals and teacher's attitudes can impact on the lives and educational aspirations of Traveller children.

It is widely reported that Traveller educational outcomes are far below those of the rest of Irish society. According to *the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 (NTRIS)*, "The majority of Travellers (70%) have only primary or lower levels of education. "The All-Ireland Traveller Health Study questioned the often-cited mobility patterns and tradition of [their] nomadic lifestyle, as most Travellers responded that they are actually based in one place during term time . . . The ESRI research paper found that among the reasons for leaving school early are



likely to be the negative experiences of Traveller children in school. Traveller children (along with immigrant children and those with a disability) are significantly more likely to report being bullied at school (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016, cited in NTRIS, 2017:12). Negative experiences of discrimination, alienation and bullying in a child's life are traumatic and can reverberate from one generation to the next, thus perpetuating the cycle of educational disadvantage in the Traveller Community. Research shows that there are significant barriers to educational progression at all stages; from primary school to the junior cycle in secondary school to complete the Junior Certificate Exams, and then from Junior Cert to Leaving Cert as many Travellers do not continue beyond the Junior Cycle. Following ideas from the United Nations report on Sustainable Development Goals, 'Leaving No One Behind: Equality and Non-Discrimination at the Heart of Sustainable Development' (unsceb.org), every child should be given equal rights and equal opportunities. If schools and education practitioners are not Traveller friendly and welcoming places for parents, Traveller children will continuously be 'left behind'.

*The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy* (2017) identified key areas where disadvantages will be targeted, stating that “[a]ccess, participation and outcomes for Travellers and Roma in education should be improved to achieve outcomes that are equal to those for the majority population” (NTRIS, 2017:25). The main objective of this research is to identify the barriers to participation in education experienced by Travellers of North Cork, and to explore the structural issues facing Traveller children in both primary and secondary schools in four towns in North Cork. The research was commissioned by 'Travellers of North Cork', “a Traveller led human rights organisation, which aims to promote Traveller rights and culture and improve health outcomes” ([www.tnc.ie](http://www.tnc.ie), n.d). Generational disadvantage for Travellers in education also impacts on life chances, thus, reducing opportunities for employment. According to the NTRIS report, “Pavee Point has indicated the following statistics. 13% of Traveller children complete second level education compared to 92% in the settled community. Of those Travellers who drop out of second level education, 55% have left by the age of 15. The number of Traveller children who progress to third level education represents just 1% of the Traveller community” (2017:11).

According to the DEIS Summary Report (2005), “Enhancing attendance, educational progression, retention and attainment “There is a clear link between pupils’ attendance patterns and their educational attainment. Successful progression by pupils from primary to second-level is of particular importance. Children and young people at risk of early school leaving can benefit from extra supports, both academic and non-academic (including sporting and cultural activities), made available during and outside of school time” (2005:3). However, not all Traveller attend DEIS schools, therefore the extra resources to enhance attendance and progression are not available to them. Education is a key factor in improving overall wellbeing and quality of life, therefore, it is important to remove the barriers to educational progression and provide specific supports to Traveller children in schools. The *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy* notes that “It is clear that best practice requires that due regard be given to the rights of the child, both as an individual and as a member of their community. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) compels us to take account of the child’s needs and the child’s culture in all aspects of education. It further requires us to ensure that the rights of the child are upheld without discrimination of any kind” (gov.ie, 2006:9). Through the voices of the parents and educators the research explores the experience of children in school, and whether or not ‘the child’s needs and the child’s culture’ are accounted for, and if ‘the rights of the child are upheld without discrimination of any kind’ (ibid).

## 1.1 Background

Irish Travellers have been documented as being part of Irish society for centuries. Travellers have a long-shared history, traditions, language, culture, and customs. The Irish Traveller community is an ethnic minority that account for approximately 0.5% of the Irish population. The culture of the Traveller community is separate and distinct from that of the majority population, with its own traditions, values, language, arts, crafts, and music. Travellers also have distinctive ways of living, such as living with the extended family, nomadism and the keeping of animals, particularly horses. The distinctive Traveller identity and culture, based on a nomadic tradition, sets Travellers apart from the sedentary population or ‘settled

people’

(mincearwhiden.ie

n.d).

After much lobbying by Traveller Organisations, Irish Travellers were granted ethnic minority status in 2017, and since then, strategies were developed, and research has been undertaken to identify how to improve their overall life circumstances. Recognising Travellers as an ethnic minority group is a step forward, however, there are many issues of inequality and marginalisation that need to be addressed, including educational disadvantage. This needs to be tackled at all levels from cradle to grave, to ensure Travellers achieve equality of opportunity and that their culture is respected within Irish schools going forward. The *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, 2017-2021 (NTRIS) Report (2017)* states, “[t]here should be a positive culture of respect and protection for the cultural identity of Travellers and Roma across the education system” (2017:26). To achieve this, *The Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy’* states that “[a]ll those involved in the education system should have an understanding of anti-discrimination, anti-racism, anti-bias and interculturalism so that all education professionals will have the skills, knowledge and attitudes for dealing with issues and challenges and for making the inclusive school and education system a reality. Within this inclusive context, Traveller identity and culture would be addressed” (gov.ie, 2006:11). Research shows that since the report was published in 2006, there has not been little or no commitment by Government to ensure schools are inclusive environments for Traveller children. However, in an effort to ensure Traveller identity and culture would be acknowledged and addressed to make schools more inclusive, Travellers are delivering ‘Traveller Cultural Awareness Training’ (TCAT) to some schools. “TCAT is an initiative that offers quality client-based training in Traveller culture. It is delivered by Travellers who are experienced trainers and have completed a special course in TCAT training delivery. It is coordinated by a steering group comprising of all Traveller led organisations in Cork city and county as well as representatives from the HSE. The training is part of an overall Interagency strategy to support better service provision for Travellers” (tvgcork.ie). The Yellow Flag Programme is another initiative available to schools, and this is “[a] practical programme that supports primary and secondary schools to become more inclusive of all cultures and ethnicities, celebrate diversity and challenge racism and discrimination” (yellowflag.ie).

However, the schools that do engage with the Yellow Flag Programme and invite members of the Traveller Community to deliver the TCAT programme, are most likely already making conscious efforts to counter discrimination and committed to creating an inclusive environment for the children. It is those schools that continue to perpetuate the cycle of discrimination and display negative bias against Traveller children through various sanctions and segregations, that need to engage in the training.

Furthermore, Baker et al, (2022) recommend that all Public Bodies need to “[e]nsure the national rollout of properly resourced trauma-informed, anti-racism and Traveller competency standardised training which is Traveller-led and delivered for staff of public bodies, such as Traveller Cultural Awareness Training (TCAT). This training should be a compulsory part of training for all public sector workers” including all education practitioners, principals, teachers, SNA’s, and other members of the school staff. “The Department of Education and Skills has introduced programmes for initial Teacher Education and for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) based on the concept of inclusive education. The Department of Education and Skills will ensure that such programmes enable teachers to deal with teaching and learning needs of all students from all cultural backgrounds and provide support for pedagogical practices that promote inclusion” (NTRIS, 2021:25). Traveller Cultural Awareness Training and Trauma Informed Care could be delivered together as a collaborative effort between members of the Traveller Community and the Trauma Informed Practice Programme in Adult Continuing Education, in addition to the Dept of Education and Skills Programmes for Initial Teacher Training. Furthermore, “[t]he Department of Education and Skills will request that the Teaching Council examine how the areas of intercultural, anti-racism and diversity are dealt with in Initial Teacher Education Programmes during the review of the “Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers of Initial Teacher Education” (NTRIS, 2017:25).

Dr Maria Quinlan was tasked with carrying out a Pilot study following the NTRIS Report (2017). According to Minister for Education, Norma Foley, the Pilot Study “was established to trial innovative approaches to improve education outcomes for Traveller and Roma pupils in Galway,

Wexford, Dublin and Cork. The pilot has been developed as a cross-Departmental initiative of my Department [Department of Education], the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Tusla Education Support Services, along with Traveller representative organisations” (Quinlan, 2021). The findings in Quinlan’s “*Out of the Shadows Report*” (2021) illustrate that the experiences are similar for members of the Traveller Community across the four Pilot sites, and the experiences of participants in this research are much the same. In schools, Quinlan points out that “[p]arents highlight the value and significance of having a principal or a teacher who they view as caring about Travellers. Members of the school community who don’t make assumptions about Travellers, who are interested in learning about Traveller culture, and who have a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination, including the use of racist language within their schools, have a very positive impact on the families” (2021:23). Quinlan found that the parents in the pilot study “[h]aving felt ‘isolated’ and ‘overlooked’ in school themselves they are passionate about wanting something different for their children. They particularly do not want their children to suffer the lack of literacy and accompanying lack of confidence that comes with it, which they and their own parents have often struggled with” (2021:14). It is important that Traveller children have a person they can trust, a teacher or principal, or ‘One Good Adult’, within the school, someone who cares about Traveller children and is interested in learning about their culture, someone safe that they can talk to. According to *Jigsaw*, “The One Good Adult is a good listener, is able to show empathy or put themselves in the shoes of the young person and understand their experience. They should be non-judgmental, which means no rolling of eyes, tutting or general disapproval” (jigsaw.ie).

Several government policies have been published throughout the decades since the first policy the *Report of the Commission on Itineracy* (1963). As far back as 1995 “two important documents were published that had a positive impact on Traveller education at primary and post-primary level: the *Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community* and the Government White Paper on Education, *Charting Our Education Future*. The task force report made explicit recommendations in relation to the education of Traveller children and stated that the “integration of Traveller children at primary level should be mandatory within an intercultural

and anti-racist framework . . . The objective should be to have all Traveller children integrated by sixth standard so as to facilitate their progression to second level” (p. 64, 67 cited in gov.ie, 2005:3). This intercultural context is still lacking twenty-eight years later, and some schools, or principals and teachers, are not Traveller friendly thus the school can be a hostile environment for Traveller children. Additionally, in 2004 the Government published guidelines on Intercultural Education which is available to all schools. *Intercultural Education for Primary Schools: Enabling Children to Respect and Celebrate Diversity, to Promote Equality and to Challenge Unfair Discrimination* (2004). The report states that, “[a]t its core, intercultural education has two focal points: It is education which respects, celebrates and recognises the normality of diversity in all areas of human life. It sensitises the learner to the idea that humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldviews, and that this breadth of human life enriches all of us. It is education, which promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination, and promotes the values upon which equality is built” (2004:3). Despite this, Travellers are continuously discriminated against, not respected and Traveller culture still invisible in many schools almost twenty years later. The lack of Traveller Cultural Awareness Training in schools and Teacher Training Programmes, compounds the problem of alienation for Traveller children and their parents within the school environment. Furthermore, “[t]he All-Ireland Traveller Health Study pointed to a reluctance to continue in mainstream education as Travellers feel that it is not associated with any positive outcomes because of the high level of discrimination faced by Travellers when seeking employment. Transgenerational issues are relevant as poor education levels among parents mean it is more difficult to read or interpret their children’s educational material making it harder for Travellers to help their children with homework” (2017:12).

One of the key initiatives of the NTRIS was to ensure “investment by the State in community-based support mechanisms to ensure greater retention of Traveller and Roma children and youths in the education system” (2017:4). Unfortunately, these mechanisms are not yet in place to support children in the primary and secondary sectors, or at least, the resources are not adequate to affect the experiences of disadvantage and improve outcomes for Traveller children.

Furthermore, the *Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community* states that “[a] culture of low expectations for Traveller students is often reported, and this can be internalised into feelings of inferiority and a belief that Travellers cannot succeed in education” (oireachtas.ie, 2021:12-13) perpetuating the cycle of generational disadvantage in for Travellers in education. Progression rates to Higher and Further Education have not seen any significant increase in the numbers of Traveller enrolments. The issues of low progression rates, poor attendance and early school leaving are far more complex than assuming Travellers do not value education, and according to Quinlan, “[d]ue to a variety of factors including stereotypical beliefs about Travellers wanting to leave school at 16, parents feel that teachers can often have low expectations of their children. The parents believe that these low expectations lead some teachers to make less of an effort to teach and encourage their children than they would with non-Traveller children” (2021:18). Educational environments need to change and become more inclusive for Travellers, if the Government wants to see a more significant increase in progression rates to Higher and Further Education.

“The Third National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education’ (2015 -2019) (NAP) was launched in December 2015. The vision of the National Access Plan is to ensure that the student body entering into, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. The plan identifies Irish Travellers as one of the target groups that are currently under-represented in higher education” (2019:3). To increase progression rates into Further and Higher education, it is essential that the barriers to progression at earlier stages in education are adequately combatted. According to the *Final Report of the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community* (oireachtas.ie, 2021),

“Travellers have severely worse educational outcomes than the general population, with lower retention and completion rates at all levels. Traveller specific education supports were cut following the financial crash in 2008. The segregation of Traveller education was phased out in a process of “mainstreaming”, but there are concerns that without focused supports within

mainstream education, Traveller students are struggling. Traveller organisations have reported regression in the progression rates of Traveller students since these cuts were made” (Oireachtas, 2021:12).

The Chairperson of the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community, Senator Eileen Flynn said in the foreward of the *Final Report*,

“We can and we must put an end to the practices and policies that have failed the Traveller community.

*Swuni a crush ain ala tober, bwikad as ayn.*

*Comthrome, atdmier a nok.*

*Recognising difference while being treated equally.*

*All we want is fairness.*

*Difríochtaí a aithint le linn caitheamh linn go cothrom.*

*Is é cothrom na féinne amháin atá uainn” (oireachtas.ie, 2021).*

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research Design

The research explored the experience of children in school, from the parents’ perspectives, and through the perspective of the educators. In the first instance, focus groups were facilitated with parents in-person, followed by one-to-one online interviews with education practitioners on MS Teams. These included, school principal, teacher, resource teacher, and Special Needs Assistant. Four towns in the region were selected and it was initially planned to conduct six focus groups at three centres, with parents of primary schools and secondary schools. However, the parents with children in both primary and secondary from three of the towns came together at two centres, and after several attempts to organise the group in the fourth town, one person engaged in a telephone conversation.

“Focus group discussion mimics the natural process of forming and expressing opinions, with open-ended questions posed by the researcher” (Schutt, 2017:132). Although focus groups are



preferably conducted with groups that do not know each other, in this case it was the chosen method because it may have been difficult to arrange individual interviews as Travellers are a hard-to-reach group, and it is also important that they have trust in the researcher and feel safe in the environment, therefore this was the best approach. Schutt argues that “[h]omogenous groups may be more convivial and willing to share feelings, but heterogeneous groups may stimulate more ideas” (2017:132). Once the focus group data was gathered from the parents, one to one semi-structured interviews were arranged with educators. The interviews were conducted and recorded via MS Teams. The questions were open-ended, inviting participants to share their children’s experiences of school, both positive and negative. The responses given were for children in both primary and secondary schools mixed together. School participants were asked more specific questions about assessment, supports and what they think would help combat barriers to education for Traveller children and improve their life chances.

Ethical approval was sought and granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) at University College Cork

## 2.2 Participants

A purposive sampling technique was used for this study as, “each sample element is selected for a purpose, usually because of the unique position of the sample elements” (Schutt, 2017:75). The participants are members of the Traveller Community and are parents of children in school, as well as practitioners in education from schools in a small geographical area, covering four towns and the rural hinterlands, where Traveller families are currently living, and the schools in the towns where Traveller children are in attendance. The parents are engaged with the services and resources facilitated by *Travellers of North Cork* in the selected towns, and information sessions were arranged to inform participants before consenting to participation in the research. The members of the Travellers of North Cork Education Working Group were the gatekeepers between the researcher and participants and were central to the recruitment process, and the organisation of venues, and dates for the focus groups.

Information sessions were facilitated in September 2022, to inform parents of children currently in school about the research, and to invite them to participate in focus groups. They were informed of the research aims, which were to identify experiences of children in the school system, with a focus on positive and negative aspects of school participation. Ten parents participated in two focus groups, in November and December 2022, capturing the experiences of over 26 Traveller children currently attending primary and secondary schools in the region. Some participants had both children and grandchildren currently in school. This adds to the richness of the data as we hear about the experiences of three generations within the sample.

Sixteen schools in the region were contacted through email and the response was low. Seven staff members from different schools in the region participated in one-to-one semi-structured interviews, held in January 2023. These included teaching and support staff and one school principal. Participants were given information sheets and consent forms to inform them of the purpose of the research. The duration of the interviews ranged from approximately forty minutes to one hour. To maintain anonymity of the staff members, participants are recorded as Participant A, Participant B and so forth, and the number of schools that engaged has been withheld in an effort to maintain anonymity of the participants.

### 2.3 Data analysis

The focus group data was recorded on a portable recording device, and deleted once it was transferred to UCC's Outlook cloud storage platform, OneDrive. The interviews were conducted and recorded on MS Teams and also transferred to OneDrive. The recordings were transcribed and analysed by the researcher and transcripts stored in OneDrive. NVIVO software was used to analyse the data, and codes were generated in search of themes. Because of the narrow focus of the research, and the small dataset, the codes were overlapping as participants reported very similar experiences. According to Maguire and Delahunt, "[I]f you have a very small data set (e.g. one short focus-group) there may be considerable overlap between the coding stage and this stage of identifying preliminary themes" (2017:3356). The focus group data produced four main themes emerged, with subthemes under each as follows:

- Theme 1: Discrimination:
  - 3.1.1 Experience of accessing Special Educational Needs assessment;
  - 3.1.2 Experience of teacher-child relationships;
  - 3.1.3 Digital Literacy;
- Theme 2: Inclusion:
  - 3.2.1 Early School Leaving Encouraged;
  - 3.2.2 Financial Barriers to Progression and Exam Supports;
  - 3.2.3 Lack of Support for Senior Cycle Students to Progress to Further or Higher Education;
- Theme 3: Intergenerational Experiences:
  - 3.3.1 Reflections on the Past and Continued Lack of Traveller Cultural Identity Awareness;
  - 3.3.2 Ongoing Intergenerational Experiences Impacting the Present;
  - 3.3.3 Discrimination in Everyday Life;
- Theme 4: In an Ideal World: Identifying Solutions to Combat Barriers Going Forward:
  - 3.4.1 Respect
  - 3.4.2 Traveller Culture Awareness Training;
  - 3.4.3 Special Educational Needs Assessments;
  - 3.4.4 Traveller Empowerment

The interview questions for school staff participants were based on the themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. The findings are presented as follows:

3a.1 Special Educational Needs Assessment

3a.2 Supports

3a.3 Segregation

3a.4 Inclusion and Exclusion

3a.5 Parent-teacher relationships

3a.6 Traveller Cultural Awareness Training

3a.7 In an Ideal World

### 3. Findings – Focus Group Discussions with Parents.

#### Theme 1: Discrimination

The overarching theme that emerged from the focus group discussions was discrimination, which is experienced by children at various levels in schools. This is evidenced in the sub-themes that are analysed as follows: the lack of assessments for Special Educational Needs; teacher’s attitude towards the children and issues around digital literacy due to the increasing use of technology for communication and homework. According to the Irish Human Rights Equality Commission, “[d]iscrimination on the ‘Traveller community ground’ occurs where one person is treated less favourably than another because one is a member of the Traveller community and the other is not” ([www.ihrec.ie](http://www.ihrec.ie)). The educational experience for the child can be impacted by the discriminatory attitudes of the school principal and teachers. While the school may have a Traveller friendly ethos, the attitude of even one teacher can have an impact on the child’s progression and overall wellbeing. The stories shared by parents starkly demonstrate this, schools do not ‘ensure that the rights of the child are upheld without discrimination of any kind’ as set out by the (1989) UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

#### 3.1.1 Experience of accessing Special Educational Needs assessment;

One major concern for the parents of children currently in primary schools is the lack of Special Educational Needs (SEN) Assessments. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) “psychologists work in partnership with teachers, parents and children in identifying educational needs. They offer a range of services aimed at meeting these needs, for example, supporting

individual students (through consultation and assessment), special projects and research” (gov.ie, 2020). The participants reported different experiences of their interaction with the school and NEPS regarding assessments. Delayed assessment is a significant barrier to progression for children as their education will inevitably suffer, as well as their physical and emotional well-being.

Helen narrated the story of her child, who is now in fifth class, and is regularly excluded from activities in school. There were other concerns around NEPS and Early Intervention, but Helen’s story is a stark example of the detrimental consequences of discrimination by the school, by not identifying the needs of the child at an early stage so that supports can be provided instead of reduced hours. The first example of discrimination towards her child was when he was excluded from school while he was wearing a cast for a broken arm.

*Helen - It's any excuse at all, they don't want [my son] in like. . . two or three year ago, [my son] had an accident and he fell and broke his hand. So, if a settled child fell and broke their hand they're allowed in school with a cast. My child wasn't allowed into school with a cast on his hand. And I asked what's the problem, 'it's for his own safety and all the other kids' safety'. I said what you mean? 'Well, he might fall and do more damage, or he might hit off another child with the cast and hurt another child'. But I said other children are left in here I said, with casts on their legs and cast on their hands. What's the difference with [my son]? You know . . . he never had an answer for me.*

Helen described how her son has recently been put on reduced hours as he does not have the necessary support in school. She said that he has not been assessed, and has struggled through to fifth class, with learning and behavioral issues escalating due to the lack of intervention at an early stage. His timetable has now been reduced to three-hour days, from 9.30am to 12.30pm, which not only minimises his opportunity to learn, but also exclusion and segregation impacts the social development of the child if he does not have contact with the other children.

*Helen - now with the last couple of weeks, they want him to come in at half nine until half 12. And I was brought in three or four mornings ago, and they're doing a plan out for him, so he'll*

*come in at half nine because he can't go in at 9 because he'll meet other kids at the gate, he's been brought out half 12 because if he goes at 20 to 3, he'll meet the other kids at the gate.*

Ivy is the grandmother of this child, and she raised her concerns regarding assessments and the school was saying how good he is when the mother asked for him to be assessed.

*Ivy - My concern is they're not assessing the Traveller children. . . and with a long time and the school is aware of it, and all we were getting is oh he's a great boy He's a great boy. Now it's gone so serious that he's [the principal] calling parents in and the thing is, there's no room there now to be assessed, 'cause they choose two children that have to be assessed (Ivy).*

Considering the issues of reduced hours and exclusion raised by Helen and Ivy, this illustrates that the child needed some intervention at an early stage, and Helen has asked repeatedly to have her son referred for a NEPS assessment, but the school has overlooked this for the five years he's been attending.

Helen is very concerned for her child-

*Helen - Now it's gone in a way where they're actually telling me like, the teacher [principal] actually told me go and get him assessed. I approached you, I said with years, to let me go forward. I said you were the one who stopped me, you wouldn't give me a written letter . . . I said you were the one who wouldn't give me the referral letter to go forward . . . Well, he said, 'I'm giving you the go ahead he now, to go and get him assessed'. This is only a week ago after all these years . . . He [the child] still had this [substitute] man teacher now, so we did the plan for him or whatever. So, the principal was in the office with us, and they said, that 'if [your son] doesn't do the plan that's been there, he will lose his small break at half 10'. Well, I said that's not fair, other children I said, not just [my son], have the same going on. But you take my child's small break. It's bad enough having him going home and half twelve I said, and bring him in half nine, but you still want to take away his half 10 break?*

Ivy made a very valid point regarding the reduced hours without an assessment. She said,

Ivy - *They won't get him assessed, they won't put him forward, but they cut his hours. Now I think that should be looked into, well fair enough if a child needs cut hours, but they cannot just cut them and not assess him.*

It seems that the substitute teacher has recently initiated the assessment, albeit a bit late considering the child will now be placed on a waiting list for a NEPS assessment, and he will be in sixth class next year. The principal has contacted Helen's husband recently also to tell him that they need to have the child assessed.

Helen - *So when I was in there a few days ago he [the principal] said he was after making a phone call to my husband. He said 'look, you have to go up to take [the child] out' . . . he said, 'I'm telling you now, go and get him assessed', and my husband said, 'but my wife is actually on to you with how long? [The Principal said], 'I'm giving you the go ahead, to go and get him assessed'. So, I went up to him on Monday morning, and . . . I said you were telling my husband, that you think we need to get him assessed. Oh yeah, he said, 'now you can go private, it costs a lot of money, but you'll still be on a waiting list, or you can go through the services or you can bring him to your doctor'. I said that's fair enough, can you give me a referral letter? 'Ohh no no no no. You just bring [your son] to the doctor, and they'll give you out a letter'.*

Helen does not know where to turn for help and how to organise an assessment for her child as her perception was that this is carried out by the school psychologist. However, Helen now realises that:

Helen - *He's not going to be assessed [in the school] . . . I don't know where to start from, I don't know what to do . . . he [the principal] said, bring him to your GP. Unless you're like you're willing to pay like and it's a lot of money, but like even paying privately, is still a waiting list.*

Furthermore, Helen said that

Helen - *[the principal] told me there as well a few days ago, 'So [your son] now was on his last warning, and to tell you the truth, I can't even see him making it to go to secondary school'.*

Helen's child progressed through primary school without any intervention, which created an enormous barrier impeding his progression to secondary school.

In contrast to Helen's story, Eva had a more positive experience as her son did have a NEPS assessment. This informed Eva's decision to change schools for him to have a better educational experience and ensure that his specific needs were met. Thus, if the school is more Traveller friendly, the child's needs will be addressed, and barriers removed.

*Eva - I've gone through the whole NEPS assessment thing right . . . I applied for that when my son was in 3rd class. He didn't get it until he was in 6th class, but it did help because it gave recommendations to different types of schools he could go to, and it meant it did bring down a barrier, I suppose that would have been put up. . . It is all down to his teachers, his SNA and the principal to put [him] forward for the NEPS, ask for the NEPS and let them know you know what they're talking about . . . early intervention in education is vital. Because if they start falling behind, they're going to want to be home because they're not going to get up. I have a boy now who always felt he was down here . . . and he's coming home happy. . . He loves going out to school he's happier and he goes mommy and I'm top of my class and I'm very good at this and very good at that.*

*Betty - When you see your child happy, you're happy.*

The different experiences shared, illustrate the importance of assessment on the overall well-being of the child.

### 3.1.2 Experience of teacher-child relationships;

Another issue of concern raised by participants was the teacher-child relationship and how this can have either a positive or negative impact on the child. Joy recounted the story of her experience when her son was in primary school. The child is now in secondary school, but his early experience can be described as traumatic for both Joy and her child.

*Joy - He [the principal] was expelling him in 3rd class, he called me into a board meeting with all the Board of Education that I never in my life entered anything like that or witnessed anything like it, by myself. And for that whole session, I cried with the shocking things and the lies, he [the principal] was manipulating the whole situation to the board, and made everything out to be worse . . . He tried to make it out to them that he [the child] was smirking at him, and he's always smiling, but he took that smile away, but he never smiled since it. He's starting to get*



*it back I think lately, but he got very serious and very into himself and he wouldn't come out of his room. He [the principal] did that to him, he actually wiped his smile on his face yeah, because he told the Board of Education he smirks and he's to stop smirking at him . . . when I cried for about 2 hours, with shock and everything, that he was actually getting expelled from school, and I was trying to plead with the Board please don't expel him from school. So, then he [the principal] decided to give [the child] a chance, he took a change. Something just happened inside there, look,' we can forget about it and start all over'. Then he segregated him. He put it into the classroom with three other Traveller boys. One was three years older than him, and one was about two or three years younger than him.*

These experiences are both traumatic and tragic for the children and the parents. Joy's son was segregated instead of being expelled, isolating him from his peers. The child is now in fifth year in secondary school having completed his Junior Certificate and doing well, however, he is limited in his choice of subjects for leaving cert because of the teacher's attitudes towards him which we will return to later.

Fiona's story illustrates how a teacher's attitude can impact on a child's happiness as this year, her son is getting on well and is enjoying school, with positive feedback from the teacher and principal of the school. However, both the teacher and the principal seem a bit perplexed that he has changed so much, compared to his report from the previous year. Fiona points out that the child has not changed but the change of teacher has had an enormous impact on his overall happiness in school. Fiona is relieved that her son is having a good year at school and is happy going every morning as this is a huge change from the previous year when the teacher's attitude caused her stress and impacted on the child's happiness in school. When the teacher called to her at the school gates with constant negative feedback regarding her child, she felt a sense of humiliation in front of other parents. This story illustrates how things can change drastically from year to year, and it only takes one negative teacher to have a damaging impact on a child's overall education. Fiona gives an account of the negative experience with the teacher the previous year first:

*Fiona - last year's teacher, he [the child] just didn't like her [the teacher], and she didn't like him either and I could tell, because every day I went there . . . the teacher had a different problem . . . she had nothing good to say. She was pulling me in front of all the other parents when I was going to collect him. . . I was very embarrassed. I rang the principal. . . and he sorted it . . . and said it would never again happen, and it didn't . . . And then she had him sitting up in front of the teacher's desk on his own. He was the only child in the class that was sitting on his own up in front of the teacher's desk. . . She said, well, it works better on his own and he works better when he's in front of me, not with other kids.*

Fiona then tells us how the child is getting on with the new teacher and how the change has had such a positive impact:

*Fiona - he's with a new teacher the stuff she's saying about him that he's the best in the class, and that she can't realise that last year's report was so bad about [her son] when she can't see anything, and she said even the principal, she said, can't believe there's a change in [her son]. I said it's the change of teacher. I said that's what the problem is, he goes to school every morning, . . . he loves getting up in the morning, going to school. He's happy, but all last year it caused stress at home because he didn't want to go to school . . . and this year's amazing.*

Teachers attitudes can also have an impact on parents when they are undermined by teachers and principals. For Diane, the teacher seemed to feel entitled to raise her voice to the child, on behalf of the parent. Further to this, her child was singled out for having her hair dyed and told to 'wear a hat to disguise herself', which is ironic in a sense as some Travellers mask their identity to avoid humiliating situations and in this incident the child was told to disguise herself. Children are also asked personal questions as highlighted in Diane's story.

*Diane - The negative stuff in the school for me would have been that the Traveller children was looked down upon. They were being discriminated even though the teachers said they're not . . . one day . . . I went in to have a meeting with the teacher, as she was putting my child on a red card. And when I went in, she started roaring at my child, I mean now, roaring at the top of her voice, so I said when she done that in front of me, what does she do behind my back? By the way, it was for my good. 'Don't speak to your mother like that. Don't use that behavior in my*

*school'. And I shook myself with the way she screamed in that room . . . And there was the experience where my daughter had got highlights in her hair for her confirmation. Also, other girls from the settled community got their hair done . . . none of them or questioned why they got their hair done. My daughter had to wear a hat to disguise herself because she wasn't allowed to get her hair done. . . . my daughter was told by a nun, she had to disguise herself and wear a hat while she was in the school, for wearing highlights in her hair . . . So that was discrimination in my eyes. And I was told I could have gone further, but I didn't, because I knew they'd bully my child furthermore. I did get apology from the nun. I went further, I went to the board of the school.*

Parents feel undermined by teachers using their authority over the child in their presence. The teachers also ask children personal questions which are often suggestive of mismanagement of money and humiliating for the children.

*Diane - They were asking our children where do we get the price of headstones that's in the graveyard, which was none of their business. Does your mom and dad go out at night? Who minds the kids, which wasn't relevant to them at all. So, that to me was discrimination in the school. She don't ask that to any of the settled community.*

Teachers attitudes impact on both children and their parents as they can exercise their power, humiliate the child and the parents, thus inhibiting a child's chance to succeed in school.

### 3.1.3 Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is also an issue and participants discussed it as another barrier for both parents and children, as technology is used to communicate with parents, and for completing homework. Covid lockdowns led to schools, colleges and workplaces shifting their day-to-day operations online, and since then, the use of technology for communication has accelerated in pace. Members of the Traveller Community were again left behind in this context, as some children did not have access to Wi-Fi and technology, and for parents, even where the technology was available, parental literacy issues inhibited their use of Apps. Schools are now using Apps and educational software, such as *Aladdin*, *Seesaw*, *Padlet* and *VS Ware*, and much of the communication from school to parents, including homework, is issued through these. Most parents do have phones these days, however, some can use these only to make or receive phone

calls. Alice has young children in school and overall, her experience is positive, and she has a good relationship with the school. However, she does worry about missing out on information because of the use of Apps such as *Aladdin* and *Padlet*, as she is not confident with the technology. All participants agreed that homework is a concern for parents and the use of Apps in education exacerbates their concerns, as technology creates a further barrier.

*Eva - during the Covid . . . members of the settled community, obviously they're learning every single day, and they're getting more advanced in technology and all of this. But the Traveller Community during the COVID regressed, instead of progressed, because there was no extra support put in place for them, to even teach them. Like myself and Diane and Betty the board members ourselves, literally had to go out and train the Travellers that was connected with our organizations, ourselves, how to even set up ZOOM . . . there was no support so even though the teachers are sending this out, yes, they're teaching, they're treating students the same by doing that, but where's the supports to bring the parents or the family members of those students into the school to show them how to do this?*

Alice talked about her concerns for her child's education due to her difficulty with the Apps, although she does also acknowledge that the school has been supportive in setting up the Apps. Eva and Betty discuss this as a wider issue for Traveller parents and other schools that are not so accommodating.

*Alice - I got a new phone and trying to set it up [the Aladdin App] on another phone, I can't do it. So, like I had to go back into the school, and they had to do it. Now they didn't show me how to do it, so I had to get another phone again, but they had to do it for me. It's like . . . if you break your phone, you can't login on someone else's device. Or . . . if you do log out, or if one of the kids log out or anything, it's impossible to get back into it. And some of them, like they send homework, my small fella, he's doing his letters and they'll say on it, like you'll get your homework and they'll say, see the. . . [Padlet] . . . for extra information, I have no idea what that means or where it is, so he's coming home sometimes and I'm doing say AB&C with him, but he might have to revise last week's ones and that's on the [Padlet] . . . I haven't a notion, so . . . because of something I can't do, then he's losing out, which isn't fair. . . Because that's not his fault. . . Or*

*even last year, and you know, at the end of the year when you get the school reports, it comes out in that Padlet thing again. So, I got no school report for my small fella last year. Like obviously I went in, and I spoke to the teacher. I know how he got on, but I actually got no school report like you know . . . I couldn't get into it and by the time I realized it was on that sure the school was closed [for summer].*

*Eva - So how many other Travellers out there that's not technology based that cannot even use a mobile phone other than receive a call.*

*Alice - Thank you OK, I can't even get into it.*

*Betty - You know two mothers came to me about it, about Aladdin and they haven't got a clue. They've been to the teacher, and she said you just need to set up on the phone and the mother said, I don't know how to do it and she said we just have to, it's not our job to teach you. It's not my job to teach you how to do it.*

*Betty - I see it as well with homework. The homework isn't written anymore, it comes through Aladdin, so there's a lot of kids going into school without their homework done.*

*Eva - So would you see this as another barrier in the Travelling community?*

*All - Yeah, yeah it is a barrier*

Grace had a positive experience which illustrates an example of good practice and how a supportive teacher can make a difference by accommodating for lack of digital literacy.

*Grace - a good positive thing is we are learning computers and stuff and we're learning more every day, but some of the teachers know now, to give out the Travelling parents the papers to sign, because they know a lot of Travellers still have a bit of literacy, I do have a bit of literacy [issues], so I would prefer to get the papers to sign things . . . a lot of teachers don't, they say, oh you have to go online. But a lot of the children's teachers are giving me out the papers now and that is a lot better than going online. And like a lot of people like, I sometimes I still don't understand.*

Overall parents worry about the impact the use of technology has on homework, exacerbating the barriers many already face due to lower educational attainment and literacy levels. Traveller parent representatives lobbied for teachers to give information to parents in hard copy, however, while some teachers have taken this onboard, other teachers continue to expect parents to go online for the information they need.

## Theme 2: Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion (or Teachers Attitudes?)

Another theme that emerged is around issues of exclusion and inclusion, whereby participants discussed how positive and negative feedback and encouragement from the school can affect both the child and the wider family. Furthermore, inclusion in school activities can make such a difference to a child's life. Again, the child's experience, either positive or negative, depends on the attitude of the school principal or individual teachers.

### 3.2.1 Early School Leaving Encouraged

The focus groups found that Traveller children are experiencing barriers to inclusion in various ways, in both primary and secondary schools. Participants discussed the experiences of their children progressing through secondary school, whereby again, the level of happiness and success in educational outcomes were sometimes dependent on the principal, the teachers, and the school ethos. In fact, the participants pointed out that no matter how good some teachers are, others are openly discriminating against and stereotyping Travellers as they are actively encouraging children to leave school once they reach the legal age of sixteen. Furthermore, subject choices are sometimes limited, as children and parents will have to weigh up whether the child will get on with a particular teacher or not, and choices are sometimes made depending on whether the teacher will get on with the child or not. The discussion was also focused on financial barriers in schools where there is a cost for the Pre-Junior Cert and Pre-Leaving Cert Exams.

Early school leaving is the first topic discussed. Betty and Alice spoke about one 16-year-old that they know of, whereby a teacher was recently encouraging her to leave school.

*Betty -The other day, we were at a meeting and there was 16-year-old told us [that] her teacher is after telling her five times that she's ready to leave school.*

Alice - *And her mother's at home genuinely trying to like to keep her there . . . and she keeps saying to her 'look, just another couple of months, just another couple of months and do it bit by bit'. Well, I suppose if you're sitting there and the teachers telling you to go home what's the point in being at school.*

For boys, the experience is no different as parents reported various suggestions by teachers that encourage them to leave school.

Betty - *Boys then would leave school, they'd be telling them you can leave school now because ye have to go make living for your wives.*

Diane - *instead of telling them that they go on and do a career for themselves. They were telling them, sure at 16 you're going to leave school anyway, you want to go working with your dad or whatever.*

Eva - *And they still need education, even if they're married.*

Diane - *but it's not even that, they're letting the boys know they can leave at 16 . . . Instead of saying no, would you not try to come on and d'you know, further education you might get better job or something out of it you know, yeah?*

Grace - *My nephew, that school now secondary school down here, and they called in the parents, and they said, I don't think like he has any need to go any further, because I think he'd be like he's dad, he'll just go out and get a job doing power washing, I don't think education is for him at all. And this child is very good and he's really liking school . . . he's doing transition year now and stuff, and he's doing work experience and I think the teacher's helping him to get the work experience. But like at the start, she said no I don't think he have any interest in this, I think he'd be like he's daddy and he'll go out and power wash.*

Joy tells us about her son, who has completed his Junior Certificate, however, his subject choices for Leaving Certificate were limited due to the teacher's attitudes. He has not chosen his strongest subjects as she has been advised that he will not get on with the teacher, or more to the point, they will not get on with him. Joy is happy that her son has come so far, as he is a bright boy and has achieved against the odds, as Traveller boys do not often continue beyond their Junior Cert. This is the same child that was threatened with expulsion in third class in primary school, which shows both his determination, and the determination of his parents to keep him in school despite the challenges.

*Joy - if I'm being honest, I don't have much of a positive experience from that [her daughter's] school. Now the other secondary school, my son's school . . . he [her son] do get the support he needs in school, he has an SNA and everything, and if he needs breaks between classes, they'll give it to him, you know. Now all that would have come from the start as well, with me going in and having these discussions . . . but they're good, they do keep up to that, now he's in fifth year now and this year he got his Junior Cert results, and he did very well in his Junior Cert. He got an A and three B's and C like. They call them merits and high merits, and she [his SNA] explained it to me.*

Although Joy has acknowledged the positive aspects of school for her son, he experienced barriers to his progression as he was unable to choose subjects that play to his strengths, because of the teacher's attitudes.

*Joy - what's happening is, he's in secondary, a couple of the teachers, this is what my negative experience about that school would be, that there's a lot of subjects like . . . he always scores, high marks in math's, you know. That would have been a subject he would have scored the high merit and whatever they call it. But he can't do accountancy, or he can't do business in the school, because teachers . . . wouldn't get on them, his SNA told me, you know . . . I think she would love to see him in accountancy, or business, but she's kind of advising me, if we go about it, things might fall apart. She said that the teachers wouldn't get on with him and they wouldn't have the patience to give him a break if he gets frustrated as he has ADHD. Now . . . he's not very*



*mad or wild or anything, they're always praising his behaviour now in school . . . they're saying he's well behaved, but he would get fidgety, and he gets agitated in the class, so he does need the breaks.*

Joy points out that her son is progressing against the odds, with the support of the Special Needs Assistant illustrating the importance of having a supportive person on his side.

*Joy – She [guidance counselor] didn't see him the last couple of years as there's that many Travelling boys in school, and I think other fellas that she's more focused towards you know, because he was kind of doing well and he had the SNA. But this year . . . we had a chat . . . and she said she's gonna see him a bit again this year, just to keep that encouragement going. She said the fifth year is hard and most Travelling boys don't make it this far. And if they did, they'd be . . . most likely to want to be dropping out even at that stage, you know, because there's other boys then that's going to be slagging them off. Probably Travelling kids wouldn't have grown up with the proper understanding of how important it is, and they wouldn't have trusted the education system in the first beginning anyway because there was a lot of racism going on.*

Another area of concern parents highlighted regarding subject choices is that Traveller children are offered an exemption from learning Irish. This is counter to what is outlined in the NTRIS report which states “The Department of Education and Skills will support the development by the higher education sector of positive action measures to encourage and support Travellers and Roma to become teachers. The Department of Education and Skills will work with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to support those wishing to enter the workforce as early years educators” (2017). Grace gives an example of this, whereby a teacher was encouraging her child to give up Irish as she would be exempt. Her daughter refused as she wanted to go to college to be a teacher and Irish is a compulsory requirement for teacher training.

*Grace - [the teacher] tried to . . . [exempt] my daughter and I wouldn't let her. . . my oldest daughter, in secondary school, they [the school] tried to get her out of Irish, and I said no . . . she didn't want to get out of no Irish I said, because she wants to be a teacher, so if she wants to be a teacher, she needs to have Irish . . . but she wanted us to sign the forms to say she didn't want*

*to do Irish, and she [ her daughter] said, I do want to do Irish, so she's doing Irish. She wouldn't get out of it.*

This is not an isolated incident according to the group discussion, as Ivy raises the question regarding Irish exemptions.

*Ivy - the most Travelling children I know are exempt from Irish, why?*

*Joy - Yeah, that's changed, that's gone now.*

*Eva – the parents are going and asking for that now themselves exempt from Irish. Because some of the children . . . will really get a headache like, I know like for my fella anyway, I had to get him exempt because he didn't understand it.*

*Ivy - But I remember I going to school I couldn't do Irish. I lived in England for so many years. [she was told] You're English and you're not doing Irish.*

*Eva - Yeah, well, it's nearly part of the curriculum where every Traveller is exempt from Irish.*

Participants discussed the lack of encouragement for a Traveller child that aspired to become a teacher, and the importance of having role models that Traveller children can identify with in the school.

*Diane - We have first cousin a teacher now . . . she went to college in Cork, UCC.*

*Cora - And she was told the whole way through school that she wasn't capable, and that she wasn't going to be a teacher, and she just said everyday going to school was hell for her, but she just blanked them out and said, this is what I'm gonna do. This is what I need to do and I'm going to do it, and she got there and she's a teacher now and she doesn't hide her identity from her pupils. She'll stand up in the class and say I'm from the Travelling community and she said, you should see their [the children's] face, they're just looking at me they're . . . shocked. And she said there was often Travelling kids in her class and . . . they'd come to her with a problem because they knew that they were from the same background, and that she'd probably be more*

*understanding than what the settled teachers would be for them. . . It's fantastic, you need more people like that, role models, more teachers to encourage children.*

It is important for Traveller children to have role models in school and having Traveller teachers that could also be the One Good Adult, this would give children someone to look up to. However, if children are encouraged to apply for exemptions from studying Irish, this reduces opportunities for the future.

### 3.2.2 Financial Barriers to Progression and Exam Supports

Even though some of the children do aspire to go to college, another significant and unnecessary barrier, is the cost of sitting the pre-exams, (also known as the 'mocks'). Some schools charge a fee as they outsource the marking of Pre-Junior Certificate and Pre-Leaving Certificate examinations. Further to this, in their experience, participants said that there is no guidance or support to complete the CAO forms, and this is necessary for Traveller children that reach this stage considering many parents have low levels of literacy and no experience of navigating such systems.

Last year, two girls sat the Leaving Cert without knowing the results of their Pre-Leaving Cert Exams, as the parents could not afford the fees to have them marked, and the principal would not waive the costs. This year, the same issue of fees has emerged for children sitting the Pre-Junior Cert Exams. The principal in the school refused to allow the children sit the exams unless the €140 fee was paid in advance even though the school receives extra capitation for Traveller children. Participants reported the unnecessary stress placed on the children the week before their exams, and on the parents who had to source funding to ensure they would be allowed to sit the exams.

*Eva - It's the principal is charging for them to be marked . . . yet the Traveller grant is meant to be there for that . . . that was one of my negatives. I have two girls who suffered anxiety, they suffered stress coming up to the real exams, the Leaving Cert, because their mocks were not marked. So, they didn't know what to work harder on and what to say, oh, we flew that with flying colors, and the difference is you know, if you say you've got 60 or 70% on one subject, you'd say,*

*well, OK, I don't need to, but if you got 40 you'd say, I need to work harder with that. They didn't get that option, they took that away from them . . . she [the principal] went around individually to the teachers and told them do not mark them. Do not mark them . . . now we have two girls [studying for the Junior Certificate], myself and Diane have two daughters, and one of them was told on Monday, 'go home now and tell your mothers and give them plenty of notice, the exams the mocks are not been marked, until we received the €140' . . . We just battled with it last year, and here we are . . . They know nothing about it [the Traveller Grant]. And I sent a print, and I emailed the Traveller grant, but . . . the principal was refusing to e-mail back or get in contact.*

*Fiona - And also what was said. Anyone that has a medical card, don't think you're getting covered by them papers being marked.*

The parents discussed the Traveller Grant which they said should be used for Traveller education including fees for the Pre exams, which is not always the case. They pointed out that some schools use the funding towards the cost of heating the school while others, according to the participants, use it for cookery and science labs. When questions were raised, Eva explained to the group, as she had asked the schools what the funding is used for.

*Ivy - And there's another thing with the schools as well. They never contact parents about the Traveller funding, what it covers, what it's for, or who it's for.*

*Joy - They never mention that.*

*Ivy - I was going to bring it up at the staff meeting. . . that should be enquired about. Because some teachers and schools are saying it's for heating, which it wouldn't be.*

*Fiona - some are saying it's for cooking utensils and the cooking classes, and the lab.*

*Eva - Traveller funding is a Traveller grant that's for every enrollment in the school, before the 30th of October of each year, the Traveller grant is given to the schools . . . . . we looked into it. It was around I think, €400 and something . . . I think for the first pay off, and then it was something like €300 and something. So, it was working out at I think was around €700 and something per child, a year, so we rang around all the schools [to ask about it] . . . [It's] for the Traveller's education. So, any books or materials that would be needed, or extra hours,*

*photocopying and all of that. Book rental, everything it was to cover. Like every child is entitled to free education, this Traveller grant was paid by the government to every school that had a Traveller enrolled, per Traveller student. It's never been used prior to now.*

Diane was in contact with a school that had a new Traveller family enrolled and she made the principal aware of the funding. The school was unaware of the funds but when notified, applied for the money and made sure that the children had everything they needed.

*Diane - Yeah. I applied to a school that had no Travelling children in the school [previously] and wasn't aware about this Traveller funding. . . . she never heard of it in her lifetime. . . . . The mother was stressed, the child was going to school crying because . . . [they] didn't have the uniform. And Monday morning she had the uniform ready for the children when they went to school, their books and the whole lot ready. . . . It was the first time, [Travellers] being in the school, she[the principal] said . . . I'm very thankful to you for letting us know this . . . tell this person, this family, when they come to school Monday morning, we'll have the books ready, and the uniform ready and everything so they have nothing to worry about.*

*Ivy - I do think the schools know, because it's just like if you're going through a medical card form, they pay A,B,C&D, everything is there in front of them. . . They have to know about it, because when they take out the paperwork, everything is written on that paperwork, what's available, what to put in for, they do know. That is a big problem, is it being spent on the Traveller children?*

*Grace - when we asked what was it used for in secondary school here, they told us it was being used in the home economics classroom and the lab classroom. I said do the Travelling children actually go into the lab classroom because I don't hear of any Travelling children going in there, which I didn't, and she goes well, it is in there and that's what we do with it . . . so I said you sent my daughter home crying because she didn't have a weighing scales.*

*Joy - Yeah, we wouldn't be able to buy one in this town anyway, we would have to be having to drive to the city.*

Grace - *she made my daughter cry. . . the child was actually in bits. She said mommy . . . she wouldn't let me cook just because I didn't have a weighing scales . . . So when she told us it [the grant] was gone in the home economics for the stuff, so I said, so why was my daughter not allowed cook because she didn't have any weighing scales. Did you not buy it? . . . because they said all the equipment was bought for home economics and it wasn't true at all.*

Diane - *But the day we had the meeting with [the principal] she didn't have a clue where that money was going. And she was the principal of the school.*

Grace - *we asked for receipts.*

Diane - *we asked the questions, and we wanted receipts, and she said, I'll go and find out. We're still waiting six months on, and she hasn't got back to us to find out where it is.*

Eva - *it was September of 2021 when we went there, 16 months.*

Joy - *and she's making the girls suffer because of it, she's really on their back now*

Grace - *She was always like that, though I remember her like that when I was going to school. She just had a dead set against Travellers.*

Joy - *my [daughter] used to be a bubbly girl before she went to that school. She used to be bubbly, and you know, now she's shy. I think they took every bit of confidence away from that. She's that shy about everything, everything. Even when she's going in in the morning oh God . . . she's in a panic in the car, she has anxiety because of her.*

The Traveller Capitation Grant is funding made available to pay for the needs of Traveller children as outlined by Eva above. However, it is not always used appropriately for the education needs of Traveller children.

### 3.2.3 Lack of Support for Senior Cycle Students to Progress to Further or Higher Education.

Another issue raised is support, or lack thereof, for children to complete the senior cycle and progress to Further and Higher Education, as is the aspiration of Government Policy. It is important that Traveller children who aspire to progress to further or higher education receive the necessary support by education practitioners to do so. However, the group discussed their

experiences during the senior cycle in school and the lack of support and encouragement in the school illustrating the school's low expectations of the children.

*Eva - Myself and Diane went into the school, and basically, they told [us]. . . that there was no support for the children in Leaving Cert. So, I said, who's the person responsible for filling up the CAO forms, the college applications, and she looked at us, and she was saying, oh no, you do that yourself. I said it's 25/30 years ago since I was at school, and I had somebody helping me to apply to all colleges, to help me fill out the CAO forms, and you're telling me that that's not here. No, there's help online. Online help? another barrier! So, myself and Diane just turned around and said here, so there's nobody actually here who can actually apply to colleges for our children in the Travelling Community, and there's nobody here can fill out forms? No, but they could go to the Guidance counselor like, but she won't be filling up the forms now, but [the principal said] . . . you know the best career for them to go down would be washing horses, because that would be what they would be used to in their culture. So, we kind of left it at that then, and we applied to the colleges ourselves, and we got them in, they're in college now and we did it ourselves.*

The group were appalled by the principal's suggestion that 'washing horses' would be a good career for their girls. This also illustrates the importance of Traveller Cultural Awareness Training as the participants argued, girls do not work with horses in Traveller culture. Again, this raises the issue of how teachers and principals can impact the child's education and the lack of support and encouragement is absolutely lacking in the school.

*Eva - There's like two types of discrimination, direct discrimination and indirect discrimination. And I think sometimes we look for direct discrimination with being segregated between being in the classroom . . . But the indirect stuff is no support and no help . . . if I wasn't in education I wouldn't have been able to apply online to all the colleges . . . I wouldn't have been able to fill up the CAO forms and I wouldn't have been able to transfer emails and stuff like that. So, I think the principal in that school for any Travellers, even out of the goodness of their heart could have took maybe half an hour out of a month to sit down and fill out a form for children from a disadvantage background. But that lack of support was definitely indirect discrimination.*

*You know? Sometimes We're looking for the discrimination, whereas you're Travellers sit over here they're not doing that, they're doing it very discretely.*

Despite the barriers and lack of support from the school, the girls progressed to college with the support of their parents and Traveller Community Development workers, who were also actively supporting other children.

### 3.2.4 Positive Experiences of Inclusion

Returning to Fiona's story, she points out that her child is enjoying school this year in contrast to last year, which illustrates the importance of positive affirmation from teachers.

*Fiona - Well, this year he has a very positive experience because he loves going to school this year compared to last year. He wants to be at school first in the morning and all that, the teacher is brilliant this year. I had a parent/Teacher meeting 2 weeks ago, I was dreading going to it because of the past experience I had, and it was all positive about him, that he was great with this, and his reading, and he's participating and stuff. And he likes to be doing things on his own not really with other Kids . . . So, she had a lot of positive feedback for me. He's getting on really well this year and it's a really good school. Last year I did have a problem with him, but this year I've had no problem and the year before last year I had no problem with him either.*

The child is included, and the teacher's feedback is positive demonstrating how the change of teacher made such a difference, and how enthusiastic for school the child is when the teacher is good. This not only impacts the child, but also parents, as Fiona described the 'dread' of going into the parent-teacher meeting.

In Helen's case, her son has had a positive experience with the substitute teacher who has intervened in other ways outside of the classroom and as Helen points out, has included the child in sports against the advice of the principal.

*Helen - I had an experience going back a few months ago. [My son's] own class teacher was out on maternity leave, so there was a new teacher brought in, he was a man. He's actually a lovely teacher. And there was blitz going on in [a nearby village], and [my son's] principal told the class teacher to not ask [my son] to volunteer in the blitz, because he wouldn't handle it. The*



*blitz, it's like You know, hurling or whatever. His class teacher had asked, what would be the reasons why he wouldn't have handled it, so he said I'll take a chance to him. So I dropped him to the blitz, I picked him up from the blitz, and he went to the second one three weeks later, and I was just called in for parent teacher meeting and he [substitute] said, Helen, 'to tell you quite honest truth, [the principal] told me that I shouldn't have taken a chance . . . on bringing [your son] to the two blitz, but . . . I'm telling you here now, your child is talented . . . the first one . . . was football . . . the second blitz was hurling, and . . . your child is talented . . . I said, why did the principal tell you not to take a chance with my child? He said, 'in case he was thrown off the field that he'd have to sit on the bench and if he overreacted, I wouldn't be able to handle him'. He said, 'when it came to half time, I put [your son] on the bench to bring another child on and [your son] sat there, and he respected me cause he had his time on the pitch already'. But the principal wouldn't, he didn't want to give my child a chance to bring him, but it was his new teacher took the chance of bringing [my son] to the blitz. But the principal didn't want to him to take that chance. . . . Oh, the child came home delighted, yeah he was delighted.*

Helen's child is talented at sport but is generally excluded, and the principal advised the substitute teacher not to take the child as he might 'act out'. The substitute teacher 'took a chance' and included him against the advice of the principal and came back with positive feedback for Helen acknowledging her child's strengths. If schools had One Good Adult available to Traveller children, teachers would perhaps be more likely to treat the children with respect.

Grace also tells of her positive experience of her daughter's school where she feels included and the school is very supportive.

*Grace- there's good feedback with my daughter. She's in the . . . primary school and they do take her out for extra help, and it's not like years ago where they throw you at the end of the classroom . . . they actually take her out into a room where there's other settled girls so she's not feeling left out, cause she's a Travelling girl just took out in a room by herself. The other good thing as well, is that they've done after school for children, all children, not just Traveller children. And I didn't put my 2 in to tell you the truth because . . . I couldn't afford €20 a week, so the principal rang me and he said, look, he said what's the problem? I said I am struggling and I said*

*there's bills, there's heating, there's food to be paid for. . . so he took in my kids for the after school and he said, I think they'd benefit . . . some weeks you might have the tenner . . . whenever you have to just give it to me. So I found that very good for my kids and they love it. Plus they listen better to the teachers to do the homework than they listen to me at home. Very positive, excellent principal in the school, free afterschool club/homework club.*

These stories highlight the importance of children having teachers on their side to encourage and support them so that school is an overall positive experience for them.

### Theme 3: Intergenerational Experiences of Education

Participants in the focus groups were both parents and grandparents of the children in schools. They reflected on their own education as the discussions conjured up memories of segregation, social isolation and racism in school. These traumatic experiences are deep-rooted in the psyche thus, parents have little trust in the education system, therefore try to protect their children from any potential or perceived negative experiences. Intergenerational trauma is apparent as the participants were constantly reminded of, and referred to, their own school experiences.

#### 3.3.1 Reflections on the Past and Continued Lack of Traveller Cultural Identity Awareness

Haunted by her experiences, Betty physically shuddered when recounting her memories of school as she said:

*Betty - The teacher opened my school bag when I was going to school to see if I had a lunch . . . And every morning when I'd go into that school and she'd open my schoolbag and she'd take out my book and say, you've nothing you've nothing. All you have today is a page and a pencil. So, it is the teachers. . . She'd check your hands to see were they clean. But not just me, the other Traveling families in the school as well.*

*Cora - they were, you were humiliated in front of your class when she was opening your school bag like that?*

*Alice - You could only imagine then why that's exactly why none of the other children want to play with you or anything.*

Eva - *And that goes back to a lack of training and a lack of knowledge.*

Betty - *A lot of children were getting free milk and free buns, not just Travelling children now, a lot of children in that school. But you'd be called out first, oh you need it, you need cold milk you need it . . . I hated milk, I wouldn't drink milk, and that teacher would stand over you, and tell you to open the milk and drink it. Oh god!*

Betty - *she'd call you first, come on, up to the top of the class, open your milk . . . [when] you hated something so much like and she tried to make a drink and you didn't drink it you were put outside the door in the corridor . . . So my father used tell me go back to bed, if you want to go to school, go, I was never made go to school never.*

Kate tells of her experience in school and remembers being punished for things she did not do.

Kate - *The way they used to talk down to you in unbelievable, I left school at 11 . . . No matter what happened they would punish you. I was the most shyest child in my class and I wouldn't speak up. The girls were smoking in the toilets, and they blamed me, so the hands were blistered off me.*

Cora paints a picture of her memories of humiliation and stereotyping:

Cora - *when I was going to school there was a nun and she used to call us in, and she used to be asking us are you going to get married now and had your parent's money, and how were they going to afford to get you married? We used to be drawing wedding dresses inside in her classroom. That's what she had us doing, she was taking us out to do literacy and she had us drawing wedding dresses in school. That was in primary school now and I'd often be put at a table by myself, and no one allowed to sit with you like, up at the top of the class by myself.*

Cora's experience in secondary school was also negative and there was no encouragement or support for her to progress to Further or Higher Education.

*Cora - They never even spoke to me about college in school. I did my Junior Cert and then I went to half ways of doing TY [Transition Year] . . . The day they actually went to see the colleges UCC in Cork, all my class went, and she [the teacher] said 'sure you won't be going to College anyway because you'll be leaving so you don't need to go'. . . . she was just totally against Travellers as you could see by one look from her face, and she didn't like ya, she didn't care if you were there, or if you didn't come, it wouldn't bother her.*

Diane and Betty responded to Cora supporting her point saying,

*Diane - Instead of encouraging her to go and look, this might change the future for you, give you a career . . . no guidance . . . you were a waste of their time.*

*Betty - you were getting married, having children, so they weren't interested.*

*Cora - They presumed you were!*

These stories are examples of the level of low expectations, humiliation and trauma experienced by Travellers in schools the past, the spectre that continues to haunt the present.

### 3.3.2 Ongoing Intergenerational Experiences Impact the Present

Participants past experiences of humiliation and trauma in the education system have an enduring impact on Travellers, therefore can influence their decision-making when it comes to their children's education. They describe how they try to protect their children in different ways, including not sending them to school, and masking their Traveller identity. However, they also have aspirations for their children to have brighter futures. Alice responded to the discussion on past experiences saying:

*Alice - No wonder so many Travelling people don't send their children.*

*Betty - I swore, when I had my children, I swore I would never ever make them go to school, never I wouldn't put them through what I went through. And [her children] used to get up . . . some mornings and say mommy I want to go to school.*

Parents' school experiences also influence their decision making when it comes to school registration and revealing their Traveller identity. Cora felt that it was in the best interest of her children not to acknowledge their Traveller identity when she registered them for school. She wanted them to have a better experience than she did, and have doors open to them when they are grown up.

*Cora - I didn't recognize my children as Travellers. I didn't feel the need . . . so I just ticked that they were Irish, so my kids are not recognized as Travellers in school.*

*Eva - Basically you to give your kids a better education and to get equality. That's one of the reasons that you didn't identify as a Traveller so they had to mask basically. Masking for protection against discrimination*

There is no evidence that the school would not be Traveller friendly as Cora's children are the only Travellers in attendance in that school. However, she perceives that her children will receive a better education if she masks their Traveller identity. The negative emotions of past experiences of discrimination are internalised, therefore she believes her perceptions to be reality, and her reasons are valid as she points out,

*Cora - Because I was put to the back of the classroom when I was in school, I wasn't taught much. I was left to kind of basically do what I want, oh leave her down there . . . she's from the Travelling community. So, I just feel that my kids shouldn't be put down like that. I want them to go somewhere in life and make something of their life . . . They shouldn't be treated differently, we're all human, like.*

Cora's continues to reflect of her own schooling illustrating why she decided to 'mask' her children's identities. She gives an example of how supportive the teacher is, and she believes that they have more advantages because it is not known that the children are members of the Traveller Community.

*Cora - Well my little girl couldn't do her léamh sa bhaile [read at home] Irish because I wouldn't have a clue about Irish, I'm not good at it at all like I got exempt from it and school . . . [so] I couldn't read her Irish to her to teach her the Irish. So, her teacher set up an online App and she would send a voice note and read the page to my daughter that she's supposed to read, so my daughter would be able to do her homework. She'd be able to copy what the teacher would say at home so that I wouldn't have that problem that I wasn't able to speak Irish. So, she helped her out with that . . . I think my children have a lot of advantages seeing that I didn't tick that they were Travellers.*

*Cora - I think that's when the teacher knows they identify you with that person they don't want, or they don't feel the need to educate you as much as they would with the settled community. I think you're just thrown there at the back of the class. . . . you like you don't realize what's going on until you become a parent yourself. And I don't want that for my kids.*

Cora's children are having an overall positive experience and the teachers are supportive. However, she 'masked' their identity to protect them from potential discrimination, which she perceives as the reason why the school is supportive. Sadly, this taints the positive experience to some degree as Cora and her children do not have the opportunity to reveal their Traveller identity, nor does she know if the school would treat her children any differently if they were aware.

### 3.3.3 Discrimination in Everyday Life

According to the NTRIS "[o]ver 40% of Travellers stated that they were not always treated with dignity and respect" (2017:11). The research demonstrates how episodes of discrimination, humiliation and dehumanising name calling were a daily occurrence. These adverse experiences are undoubtedly traumatic, thus, the experience of trauma can become internalised and deep-

rooted. Participants discussed the progress they are making within the Community, through education and Community Development projects, therefore they are becoming more empowered, and confident that they are breaking down barriers, supporting members of the community lacking in confidence. Some of the women achieved the Diploma in Leadership in the Community with Adult Continuing Education at UCC and were among the 21 Traveller women who graduated at UCC in April 2022 and are now advocating on behalf of other members of their Community. However, it is an ongoing struggle as discrimination is ever-present regardless of their achievements in education, and the continued fight for their human rights as were highlighted by the group. Past educational experiences have lasting effects, again, haunting the present, as Betty pointed out, she *'didn't feel good enough'* to go to UCC for the graduation.

*Betty - I wouldn't even go [to UCC] for that . . . I done that course and I wouldn't go to graduate . . . I didn't feel the confidence . . . I probably didn't feel I was good enough . . . Because you're put down your whole life through like . . . and even though I knew I was after passing, there was still that fear in me. Aw if I'd go up there, she'd say oh you're not getting it, or, it was wrong, that fear was still in me. . . And all my friends were going to it, and they were saying come on Betty you have a right to go.*

*Alice - And she passed it and everything, got a distinction and all*

*Diane - Ya we were all on the news, the Six o Clock news*

*Eva - And I think as well that we're so used to discrimination in school that when we finish school and move on to the outside world when we faced it on a daily basis probably 10 times a day, it's normal for us, and like the girls you all did the Leadership Programme, and they were all on the TV and they did everything. They had nowhere to go for a meal.*

No matter how hard Travellers try to change the situation for themselves and their families, they are faced with barriers and exclusion in everyday life. The conversation evolved and the group discussed their efforts to celebrate their graduation, as they tried to book a celebratory meal.

However, there were no tables available at the restaurant on the date they wanted to celebrate so they asked for another date, and they were presented with obstacles and denied the opportunity to go out and celebrate where and when they wanted to. This incident illustrates the 'cold reality' of their lives as Diane and Eva point out;

*Diane - Yeah, they wouldn't give us a restaurant for a meal.*

*Eva - Well, they refused a restaurant for them to have a graduation meal. So, they had to come home. . . that was the cold reality after passing they could not actually go out for a meal.*

*Eva - My sister rang up to book a meal and she was asked for her name, so she gave her name and said for how many, and she said it was the graduation meal, and I think it was for eight or nine at the time. And then she went on to ask her was it all women, was it all adults, what's your address? And she goes, I'll get the manager to ring you back. So, the manager never rang her back, and then she went on to ring back again and they said, sorry, we're booked out. She [her sister] goes oh yeah, that's fine, what about tomorrow evening, and she [the manager] goes no, sorry, we're booked out till Christmas.*

*Diane - oh and we have a funeral*

*Eva - my sister said, could we push it out to Monday evening, and she goes we have a funeral Monday evening, this was like the week before.*

*Diane - So she said, how would you have a funeral?*

*Cora - How would the person be even dead*

[Laughter from the group] They were bemused at the naked lie told by the manager as the Irish funeral ritual is usually held over a three-day period.

*Diane - She stumbled over her words, she didn't know what to say, yeah, we have a funeral*

When asked how the owner knew that they were Travellers, Eva said,

*Eva - she checked her out because when she rang [and gave her name] she just obviously got her address. All she had to do was go into Facebook look up [name] and she knew*



Diane - *I went in, I got it another day then, I booked it then and she said I saw you on the news, all excited, yeah, I said, yeah, she said great, 21 women of ye, I said yeah, and she was all talk, but I know her personally . . . because I would have went in there from work, with work colleagues. So, she would have known my face, but . . . if you ring up, she'd know [a Traveller] . . . by your voice.*

The conversation continued giving several other examples where they were not able to celebrate other events, or they would mask their identities to avoid being refused.

Eva - *she's not very Traveller accommodating. But that's normal, but that's the place that we used to be able to go for a meal even as sisters, you know, we go out once or twice whatever a year, and we'd have to use all different names, and now like it's like, there's still the masking so now we couldn't go to dinner, they never got it, Diane did in the end because she walked into her, and she'd known her, but if I walked in, or someone else walked in that she didn't recognize and thought we were from the Traveller Community, no.*

Cora - *you're refused respect.*

Diane - *So you Try to make a difference like to life but it's still backfiring on you*

Eva - *my niece was 18 the other night, and she went for dinner and she had to go home Because there was no pubs would let her in, and. She's one of girls in college.*

Cora - *What about the girls doing the Junior Cert?*

Eva - *they couldn't go to their Junior Certs [party], they were the only 2 Travellers in the class, my daughter, and my niece, and their Junior Cert results was out. Now they don't drink anyway, but all they're settled people were going into a pub and they couldn't go, and they [settled people] were saying, why are you not allowed or whatever, they said yeah we will be allowed go, but we're just not going. . . my kids didn't go because they felt they'd be refused at the door, even though they've never done anything before, or were never in a pub in their lives, they felt shame, ashamed if they were to be turned away in front of their friends*

Cora - *Yeah she's very discriminating against Travellers, the pub that it was on in*

*Eva - She said she'd lose her license to keep the likes of Travellers out of her pub*

*Diane - before I'd serve them dogs were the words she used*

*Eva - They're the words she used yeah,*

*Diane - I'd lose my license, she said before I'd let the likes of them dogs in, dogs she called them.*

The lack of respect for Travellers in wider society ripples through the generations whereby the Junior Cert children did not go to the school party to avoid the humiliation of being refused in from of their peers.

#### [Theme 4: Identifying Solutions to Combat Barriers Going Forward](#)

Participants were asked to identify solutions to make the school environment more Traveller friendly, and to give their views on how the overall educational experience and progression rates for Traveller children could be improved. First of all, they want their educators to treat their children with respect, offer them support and encouragement to improve their life-chances. To achieve this, participants said they want Traveller Cultural Awareness Training (TCAT) to be delivered to all schools, and participation in the Yellow Flag Programme for schools to become more inclusive and challenge discrimination, to ensure children are treated equally and with respect. Further to this, participants proposed that TCAT training should be included in Teacher Training Programmes, and Traveller culture should also be visible in the curriculum for all children to learn, enjoy and celebrate Traveller culture, as part of Irish culture and heritage.

In an ideal world, participants said that they want their children to be treated with dignity and respect by their educators and have the same opportunities as children from the 'settled' community. They want school to be a positive experience, and not depend on whether the teacher will like the child or not. Special Educational Needs Assessments are also high on the list of priorities, and in an ideal world, Traveller children in need of assessment would be identified earlier in their primary years and a plan put in place between the teacher, parents and child.

### 3.4.1 In an Ideal World – Travellers want their Children to be Treated with Respect

Participants shared their visions of an ideal world for their children in schools. The fundamental issue underlying everything is respect or the lack thereof, and their vision, is one of a world that would respect Travellers, treat them fairly and equally, and that their children would not be discriminated against in school, thus breaking the cycle of generational disadvantage.

*Eva - in an ideal world we wouldn't be sitting around here this morning talking about negatives, so I suppose just more praise and encouragement, and everybody treated as equals, and definitely less bias from the teachers and principals in the school. And to be less discriminatory . . . the Travelling children to feel less discriminated against.*

*Diane - so I think starting off anyway, the children needs to be treated with respect and be equal in the schools. Not to put them out like on a black mark in the school which is happening. I've seen it happening, I lived the life myself and I know it. Now there is a small bit of change, and that's no thanks to the teachers. It's the parents that educated themselves, like myself, and is working for the Travellers of North Cork, and is going in and asking questions now, and trying to make a better life for the children. . . I've lived this life, and I don't want my children living it . . . I still see some of my children living it, still. But we are making small changes, so there is some good stuff, positive stuff, but there is still negative stuff going on, and there is discrimination going on in the schools. The teachers will be all smiles to your face, especially the principal. She's two faced and I'm been honest about it, I've seen it, I've been in the room with her, so I know what she's capable of, so that needs to change. And by changing that, we need the TCAT trainers in to every school. And the Yellow Flags for inclusion in the school.*

*Cora - I suppose, if they give us a chance, not paint us all with the one brush, and I know there is people out there, that maybe is not as kind as other people, but that's in every community, that's not just in Travellers. . . So, I think the big thing would be to be to recognize us as a person, and not as a community . . . we're all human, we all deserve a chance in life . . . to see you as a person to see what you really are like, instead of listening about what other people think of Travellers. . . I'd like them [her children] to be happy and school and to be educated and to be treated equally. And for . . . the teachers to recognize them as a person and give them their equal*

*rights to education that they deserve. And maybe then encourage them to go further in life, to go to college, to get a job, instead of telling them like I was told, sure you'll be leaving school, you'll be getting married. There's more to life than teachers to be telling you that. . . There was no encouragement there, so maybe if the teachers got more training around the Travelling community and more encouragement, I suppose to encourage students to go further, then it would make big difference, because we would have educated Travellers in the community that would educate other Travelling children, maybe they could be teachers someday.*

*Eva - We're used to feeling discrimination on a daily basis so yeah.*

*Diane - it is like some people don't even recognize, maybe it was the way they were brought up and they don't realize the hurt that they cause the Travelling Community on a daily basis, because we were doing a TCAT training one time, and professionals now was in this room, and . . . they said, 'we grew up knowing that you were the boody man and you were told to stay away from them they're the boody mans'. And it was a professional nurse that actually said this to us. she said 'it wasn't what I knew, it was what I was being told as I was growing up'.*

The participants face discrimination on a daily basis, however, they are also forgiving as they acknowledge that sometimes, settled people *don't realise the hurt they cause*. However, some people are engaging in TCAT training and the Travellers themselves are making small changes and reaching some professionals that provide services.

#### 3.4.2 Traveller Culture Awareness Training for Education Practitioners

One issue that was raised by all participants is the lack of understanding of Traveller culture and identity in schools and in wider society. They proposed that all schools should facilitate Travellers to deliver the Traveller Culture Awareness Programme to their staff. Furthermore, they felt that this should be an essential part of Teacher Training Programmes, to be included in Equality Diversity and Inclusion modules in Teacher Training Colleges. This training would give all educators an insight into the challenges Travellers face and how these challenges impact many aspects of life, including their ability to do homework. They argued that Traveller culture should form part of the mainstream curriculum in schools, so that children would also understand

Traveller culture. Parents in Quinlan's study also made the point that schools are designed for settled children. The schools that have engaged in Traveller programmes are more welcoming environments for the children.

The best way to combat these discriminatory practices and the negative stereotyping in schools is to acknowledge and celebrate Traveller culture. The participants all noted the importance of Traveller Cultural Awareness Training in school, for all educators and school staff.

*Joy - Traveller culture to be celebrated in the schools . . . and Traveller Pride week . . . It could be a good opportunity to bring that in. To be brought into the curriculum . . . they should be . . . teaching all children like in their classroom. It should be part of their daily thing you know . . . all teachers should have the TCAT training . . . that's number one for me that should be taught to all teachers, all principals, anybody out there that's teaching children should be taught TCAT training. . . I think it should be in the colleges as well. Look . . . it should be part of their training.*

*Betty - Traveller cultural awareness and stuff like that . . . to understand that there is overcrowding with the Travellers, that everybody knows that, so some children don't get a chance to do the homework at home, they really don't. There's some parents haven't got a clue how to do the homework with the children . . . So let them go to the after school and let them go to the homework club.*

Kate also made the point that Traveller children often live in overcrowded conditions which are not conducive to doing homework.

*Kate - The children don't have space to do homework, they don't get proper sleep and don't have time for a shower with 19 living in the house. Some are living outside the house in mobile homes all rushing in the morning to have a shower for the children to get to school. We had two cases of covid and having to use facilitates everyone got covid. The rest of the family are in 3 mobile homes outside with no toilets or showers and my son has 4 out of 6 children going to school.*

Diane wishes for equality of opportunity and outcome in education.

*Diane - Yeah, all the children are to be included on all the different levels and cultures, all treated equally, that there's no difference. That's my wish for the future, and that the children get the education that they're entitled to, and that they get employment afterwards. They can go on to college or do whatever they want once they get the support they need.*

Traveller Culture Awareness Training for educators would be a step towards achieving equality according to participants.

*Cora - it's the teachers that need more training as well around Traveller culture, like there's a lot of women now giving the TCAT training, Travellers themselves teaching teachers about their background and where they've come from.*

*Betty - they need Traveller Cultural Awareness, they do, they all need to be taught that I think teachers really do need training to help the child to fit into the class.*

Children need to feel a sense of belonging, and to achieve this, teachers need training to understand, appreciate and value Traveller culture.

#### 3.4.3 Special Educational Needs Assessments for Traveller Children.

Another major issue that needs to be addressed is the lack of Special Needs Assessments in schools. In an ideal world children with additional learning needs would be identified at an early stage and assessments would be carried out to identify the child's specific learning needs.

*Ivy - Every Traveller child should be assessed by the time they're leaving first class before they go into second class. If they're slow in English, slow in Irish, in maths there should be an assessment, and now they say they're only funding for two children a year. I think Traveller funding should be special, specifically for more Travellers, yeah?*

*Helen - More assessments, more assessments need to be done.*

Everyone agreed that this was an important factor for children to be assessed in primary school so that supports would be in place so that transition from one year to the next is as smooth as possible. The group chimed in '*yeah definitely*'.

Digital literacy is another concern for parents, therefore schools should bear this in mind when communicating with parents and when issuing homework to be completed by the children. Young children in particular need help with homework, however, due to low levels of digital literacy the use of technology makes it more difficult for parents to help their children.

*Alice - I think it's the parents had more support with like the likes of the apps and stuff, it would help the children to get out a bit more because if the parents can't help the children, they're going to fall behind in school and in long term I think it's not even that I want my children to work and I want my children to have the choice. Like if my daughter wants to stay at home and raise a family, that's her choice. But if she wants to go out and have a career, that's her choice as well. I don't want that choice being taken away from her.*

Ultimately, in an ideal world parents want their children to have more opportunities than they themselves had.

#### 3.4.4 Traveller Empowerment – Education and Community Development.

Traveller women are not only engaged in Adult Education, but are also working in the Community as Development Workers and even in their roles as Outreach workers representing parents in schools, teachers still have the ability to make them feel overpowered, as Diane points out;

*Diane - Traveller organizations, and . . . the Traveller resource workers as well, going out talking to the parents, telling them they don't have to accept this anymore. They need to stand up for themselves, and if they don't have the confidence, we, as the workers would go with them, to go to the school . . . so that you're not overpowered by these teachers, which they've done in the past . . . I'd have a support worker with me . . . and I'd be there with the parents and I if there's a problem in the school. . . There are changes because we're making it. Not me personally but Traveller organisations, Travellers are doing it themselves not the teachers*

*Betty - And they have to fight hard to do this*

*Diane - Traveller organizations, and I think it's a lot to do with the [changes]. Traveller resource workers as well, going out talking to the parents, telling them they don't have to accept this anymore. They need to stand up for themselves, and if they don't have the confidence, we, as*

*the workers would go with them to go to the school and have a talk so that you're not overpowered by these teachers.*

#### 3.4.5. Example of Good Practice - Inclusion of Traveller Culture in the school

One school that the parents spoke of is very inclusive, and they acknowledge and celebrate Traveller culture as is illustrated by Grace. Grace tells us about the Traveller culture art project she was involved in with the children in school. Others agreed that the inclusion of Traveller culture in the curriculum does make the school environment more welcoming.

*Grace - what I've done is . . . in the small primary school, we did an art project and we had to do . . . a symbol of our culture. So, me and a few of the girls did the wagon, the prayers and stuff, and they're all gone up on the wall. And they got frames for all our art so in years to come when the Travelling children comes on, they'll see their culture up on the wall, you know, that was lovely.*

*Joy - Yes, yeah, yes, there needs to be more of that in school [to] see that they do fit in, and they do feel comfortable because their culture is thought something of it in school too.*

*Eva - The culture should be part of the curriculum, yeah?*

Fiona speaks of another school that has made steps towards acknowledging Traveller culture in their school and have plans to TCAT training for their staff.

*Fiona - The school has changed a bit because the Travelling people got involved with the school and they've got the Yellow Flag in there now. And they're willing to get TCAT training for all of the staff in the school. . . So that'll be a good thing to bring into the school, because obviously Travellers are different and have a different way of being brought up and that. So, like some children mightn't have their big spacious home to go home to do their homework, they might actually be going home to the caravan and 10 other children in it, you know it's not as easy for Traveller children to do their homework at home, as it would be for settled children. so, they got the Yellow flag, which was brilliant I think. And they were willing to get TCAT training as well, so I think that's brilliant.*



Cora - *It has to be in the curriculum whether it makes a difference or not, they should be taught in anyway.*

In an ideal world, all schools would have TCAT Training and the Yellow Flag to celebrate and promote Traveller Culture and identity. Participants also highlighted the need for early intervention and extra SEN assessments for schools with Traveller children in attendance. Traveller adults are engaged in education and lobbying schools on behalf of their community.

### 3a Findings – Interviews with School Staff

Education practitioners from schools in the region shared their day-to-day experiences of working with Traveller children in their schools, and discussed some of the barriers faced, and the support they have in place to address these barriers. Following the themes from the focus group discussions with parents, the school staff were asked if there were extra supports available for Traveller children, if children are segregated or on reduced hours, and NEPS Assessments, and if the school had participated in Traveller Culture Awareness Training which were important topics of discussion with parents. Examples of good practice are also evident, and one school illustrates a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, celebrating the cultural identities of its students, including Traveller culture and the school's participation in the Yellow Flag Programme.

Education practitioners were asked how many children they can refer for assessment each year, and what support is available for children in their school. Participants spoke of the shortage of assessments, and in some cases children transition from primary to secondary school without any diagnosis, or support in place, which makes secondary school even more challenging. One participant noted the benefits of having a diagnosis for a child and how the necessary support in place ensures the child can *hit the ground running*.

#### 3a.1 Exclusion and Inclusion

One staff member noted that the system is designed for settled children, and Traveller children are expected to fit in to a system that does not acknowledge their cultural differences. This echoes a point made in Quinlan's research as "[p]arents describe[d] how Traveller culture, values, experiences and needs are excluded from the education system. Rather than being a system

which values inter-culturalism, the education system is seen as being a 'settled' system, which values only settled values and norms which Travellers must accept, and assimilate to, even if it does not meet their needs" (2021:19). This illustrates the necessity for schools to engage in Traveller Cultural Awareness Training.

The topic of reduced hours and exclusion was raised as the parents in focus groups had discussed examples whereby children were threatened with exclusion, segregated from their peers and placed on a reduced timetable. Concern was raised regarding children being segregated in primary school, and the challenges this presents for both staff and the children when they transition to secondary school.

Participant A - *I just learned . . . that they [the primary school] have a unit, a special classroom where they have segregated all Travellers. They've taken them out of the mainstream, and they put them into a classroom of their own, and that's going to create a huge problem for us because when they come in here, they're gonna have to go into mainstream. One of my parents went down and he took his Traveller kids out of the room, because he didn't want them all in the one room because they have feuds going on between them . . . He said he had no idea that his sons were sitting in the room all day, every day with Travellers and are not allowed mix . . . he removed them, and he requested to go back into the mainstream . . . these [children] will not be able to cope in mainstream, because they've been used to being in this situation for a year. And then their comrades, and their peers are used to them being so different that they had to be put in another room, and now they're expected to sit with these guys in the same room. So, the stereotyping and the kind of biased and prejudice that that would build up. . . Now, they did that when I was growing up in school . . . in a place where there are high Travellers and . . . they used to have their own room, you know, we were all aware of it, but I thought that day as well gone.*

The participant continued to explain the impact this segregation has on the children when they transition to secondary school.

Participant A - *You talk about the barriers, every year I have to do battle, because the Traveller students come in here and put them into mainstream and they don't do an hour. They don't do an hour class because they're so used to working for 15 minutes, get a reward, go out . .*

*. then work, then go out, then work, then go out, and they've grown up with this in the primary school. And they literally cannot cope when we asked them to sit down for an hour and do some work.*

Participants share their frustration with the education system as it is designed for settled children and Traveller children are expected to fit in.

*Participant A - Well you see, you have the established system of school. We have our system in place, and they're expected to fit in, and if they don't fit in, they have to take the sanction . . . It's very hard to compromise or meet them halfway and mould it and change it slightly to suit these guys. That's my job, [to say] to the principal or to the management, look, this is not working for him . . . So, he has to be given a bit of leeway here . . . but little things . . . in the system that just crucify and diminish their success and determine that they're suspended or determine that they're thrown out for the little things. You know what I mean? . . . Dates written up, no pen day, written up. We didn't have a copy written up.*

*Participant A - we're saying more and more we should be [designated DEIS status] because of the needs of the students coming in first year, I've noticed in the last few years, the needs have increased*

*Participant A - There's a there's a gap. There is a big gap in the system and it's the square peg in the round hole. My guys are square pegs.*

### 3a.2 Special Educational Needs Assessment

Participants were asked about psychological assessments for Traveller children as it was a major topic of concern for parents as they said the schools only had access to two assessments per year therefore, some children are left behind as we have seen in the case of Helen's child discussed in the focus groups. Participants from the schools were also concerned about this as some children have transitioned from primary to secondary without assessment, thus the necessary support is not in place. The school with DEIS status has extra resources therefore were able to fund extra assessments.

Participant C - *Firstly we were only getting one assessment a year in our school. Sometimes, depending, towards the end of year, we may get a second. So, you are trying to prioritize who really requires that assessment. But, I suppose again because we have the DEIS budget here in the school, which is . . . a huge benefit, we actually have got pupils assessed privately as well, just to make sure that they are assessed before the leave us . . . and that would be from all the diverse groups . . . it could be something like dyslexia, it could be just literacy in general . . . maybe just really falling behind in reading kind of literacy standards. It's just a range of issues really, but mainly literacy, dyslexia, they would be the main ones . . . for our assessments in the school, it would be mainly with our education psychologist . . . there could be a child very strong orally and . . . we're not getting it down on paper.*

Participant A - *One NEPS a year and we have to use it wisely.*

Participant F - *I have a little boy who might have ADHD, but he's going through the process of an assessment at the moment, so he doesn't have any official assessment . . . I think the mom is driving that very much at home.*

Participant B - *There, there's still a big problem there with children arriving into secondary school level . . . that would have no diagnosis. But the [primary] school would have said ah sure, we could see that there was something not quite right there, and they were left in a unit, and the groundwork may have been started and not finished, or there might be no groundwork at all done. So . . . there is a delay in supports available then . . . when they're arriving into secondary school . . . And you will find that the primary schools that have gone and sought a diagnosis, they're the boys that really . . . hit the ground running, right, because . . . we'll understand their personality . . . a lot better when they arrive in, and we understand triggers.*

Participant D - *If we had concerns alright, we'd send them on to psychologists, we'd fill out the forms. . . Some [parents] might be privately assessed, others would go through the school.*

Participant B - *I suppose it's the same in all walks of life. The kids that get the most attention are the ones that the parents are jumping up and down . . . so if the parents aren't very*

*vocal about it . . . sometimes they can fall between two stools.*

*Participant A - So it's a balancing act. And it's the system. It's the system. Yeah, I don't know where we go with it like, even the exams. I know we have the LCA [Leaving Cert Applied] now which helps but even the expectation of a junior cert, especially when the coming in from primary from our primary, I've had guys who can't do the alphabet . . . Literacy issues coming into secondary school, no assessment, as the school said he's fine.*

Overall, the experiences illustrate the importance of identifying extra learning needs at an early age so that 'no child is left behind' and the necessity of having the support in place so that the child can have the best possible educational outcome. However, if educators have low expectations of Traveller children they are in fact, 'left behind' as is evidenced in the example of children transitioning to secondary school *who can't do the alphabet*. Traveller children are expected to integrate into the system, which is designed by settled people, for settled children.

### 3a.3 Support Available to Children in School.

Participants were asked what support is available to children who need it. However, in most cases the children discussed had already been assessed and had a diagnosis, therefore the schools would have the resources in place to support the child. In one case the school has been designated DEIS status, therefore the resources are available to the school, and the class sizes are smaller which benefits every child.

*Participant C - We had DEIS band two for a few years, so it was only announced there last year that we . . . were put into category of DEIS band one which is fantastic for us. Yeah. So, we had some of the supports, but we wouldn't have had the lower class numbers, let's say, that would have been the main one, pupil teacher ratio. So, we're delighted to get that.*

*Participant E- See in our school . . . if somebody needs the help they get the help, so it doesn't matter if they're a Traveller, child, or if there's someone struggling . . . everybody is kind of the one . . . I suppose you can never have enough resources, like manpower . . . more manpower,*

*would be amazing . . . I think . . . with the literacy lift off and everything like that, that really helps . . . bring out their potential for their literacy . . . So that's amazing for them. It does bring on the ones that can come on. It does bring them on. Definitely.*

One participant is very involved in the behaviour of children in school, and tells of the strategies used to manage behaviour so that a child can continue to learn. The participant sometimes advocates on behalf of the children that are not fitting in to the school system, and also offers support to the parents.

*Participant A - I meet many [children] one to one, and I run various programs, or I meet them in small groups. I work on the continuum of support, level one is across the school . . . the code of conduct, and then in level 2 where I had some students worked through maybe a short intervention, anger management, or . . . peel back an incident and learn from it, and then I work with the level threes which are about maybe 5% of the school population they are my priority . . . they'll be top heavy with the Traveller Community.*

Another participant spoke about a particular child that has been assessed and the programmes the school has in place to support the child to learn and manage behaviour.

*Participant D- Now we've tried . . . a lot of those programmes . . . This year now he has [support] every day, for about maybe 20 mins or 25 minutes . . . how to deal with certain situations and it's the 'Weaving Well-being Programme' they're doing, and there's 'Hot to Cool' [is] another one that he was doing.*

Another discussed the sense of achievement when children stayed in school and completed the Leaving Certificate Applied.

*Participant A- our greatest successes . . . as far as I'm concerned, was the two Travellers who graduated from Leaving Cert Applied with distinction . . . And they were being expelled in third year. I went through the expulsion process, and we fought the case, and we won it . . . one of them was before the board and he finished with distinction after all that . . . You can have seven*

*or nine A's, but to me that was the real success in school . . . the guys that are most needy, and it's great to celebrate their success.*

This illustrates the importance of having an advocate in schools for Traveller children as they can succeed if they have One Good Adult on their side. Participants expressed their pride in seeing children succeed against the odds.

### 3a.4 Parent-Teacher Relationships

Engagement between the school and parents is very important for the child's education and well-being. The responses from schools when asked about the parent-teacher relationships were mixed, with some parents very engaged and others not. Literacy and digital literacy can affect the parent-school relationship if the school uses technology to communicate. Participants acknowledge this also and, in some cases, make efforts to remove these barriers. One participant described how she overcomes some of the challenges removing barriers for parents, by providing photos of teachers they are to meet at the parent/teacher meeting, as well as a list of questions for them to ask about their child.

*Participant A - And I got my 2 Traveller [parents] to come into the last parent teacher meeting. I rang them, I gave them a list, and gave them photographs of the teachers they had to go to, so the teachers got a bit of a hand I think when they waltzed in you know. It went well, because I rang the parents that night to see how did it go, and they said it was great, they heard how he's doing, it was very positive, he just wasn't working. I said was it nice now to hear all that, you know. And I said it shows a great interest, so . . . the teachers will know now that they're very on the ball now . . . I told him what to ask the various teachers as well, so I'm trying to encourage . . . we've had a tradition here of the Traveller parents don't come. So it's good. It's good that we've started that this year. That's one of the targets to get the parents in, and I'm on speed dial. So, the parents ring me constantly, you know it's just no problem.*

The support from the participant and the photos of the teachers were a great help to the parents who were able to engage with the teachers at the parent-teacher meeting. This is a great idea to overcome barriers particularly for parents with literacy issues.

The next participant had concerns whereby parents did not attend the parent-teacher meetings.

Participant F - *Now . . . parent teacher meetings are hard. I had a few no shows, and you know I followed up and tried . . . to make other appointments, but they just . . . didn't come in and I suppose, I don't know why . . . I did make several appointments for them, and they rearranged and cancelled and rearranged and cancelled. But I think it's probably more to do with . . . their reluctance to come into school. And I think they're probably just expecting a negative meeting. You know their experience of parent teacher meetings . . . for themselves is probably negative. So, they're just, you know, why would you come in to hear negative . . . Which it wouldn't be, and I always try and say, you know . . . I'll only tell you good things, you know, to be fine but I don't know.*

The participant surmised that the parents perhaps experience fear due to their own negative school experiences, which is a strong possibility as this was raised in the focus groups by parents. Digital literacy is mentioned as a barrier to ordering school lunches also and the participant overcomes it by giving the list in paper form.

Participant G - *I communicate a lot via WhatsApp with them . . . they don't like doing anything online. There's a great fear of the online . . . for example, we have a lunch company who supply all our lunches for the schools. So in the ideal world, each parent would go online and they would select the food for their children for the week. But a lot of the parents will say from the Travelling community, they don't know how to use it is what they would say, and they would prefer a paper form. And if I call out and fill it out with them . . . or hand it to me so that they know now we've given it to the school . . . but certainly anything online, you know, even during COVID times, they don't want to know. And I can understand that because either you know not everyone has access to the Internet and . . . literacy skills, you know, on computers, you know, it's quite different.*

Other parents engage with the school on a more regular basis to work with the school in support of the children.



Participant D - *In fairness, his mother . . . she does try her best with him . . . she's very supportive of the school. Now he does get, he's quite challenging and there would be kind of serious, serious conversations to be had, but in fairness I don't think she's ever gone against the schools, opinions or anything like that, so she does just try her best with this particular child, and she does try to give him the best possible chance.*

Another example of parents encouraging their child to go to school, and the school celebrating the *little victories* when Traveller children succeed, playing to their strengths which is very important for children to achieve.

Participant B- *[this] new boy in first year doesn't want to be here. But it's also obvious that the parents are really . . . [saying] that this is where you have to go . . . And it's kind of little victories, you know, every day he comes in, it's a little victory . . . especially in . . . the Travelling Community, like if they go past second and third year, past their 16th birthday, it's a huge success. And to be fair to the school, they really celebrate . . . [these] successes and they make a big deal of it, and . . . they make the fact that they continued and achieved as something really special.*

Apart from the standard parent-teacher meetings and school contact regarding issues with the child reported by participants, another participant discusses the cultural activities they run to encourage parents making the school environment more inviting. The school promotes equality, diversity and inclusion and is very actively involved with cultural events and some parents from Travellers of North Cork have participated in cultural projects and storytelling.

Participant G - *We are very blessed and very lucky here, that the ladies from the North cork Travellers are working very closely with our school and that has made a phenomenal impact in the school because they, you know, the ladies come in like they've been involved in an art project that we've been running here with parents from all other countries, you know, so we've a diverse range of children here. And they've been very forthcoming in educating us about their cultural backgrounds and the difficulties they experience . . . the reason why they kind of feel that the educational establishment . . . did them a disservice . . . And by the ladies coming in and being*

*involved in our culture days and talking to our children and telling stories and explaining the cultural background, it has changed things here a bit because it is made more of a two-way kind of a conversation take place. And . . . they bring a lot of richness into the school . . . I'm hoping that that change, will work for other . . . parents from the Travelling community, that they'll feel that this is an open place and that, you know, they can approach us and that they can come in and that they're very welcome. Because our bottom line is that we are educating all children. We're educating their children and they have a huge and a very important say in the education of their children, you know.*

The next respondent also spoke of the cultural projects in the school and the involvement of parents from Travellers of North Cork.

Participant C - *there's a lovely group of ladies in North Cork, the North Cork Traveller Association, and they're doing tremendous work, and now they would be very involved in our school . . . we would invite them into any talks or anything that's going on in the school . . . [the Home School Community Liason Officer] ran a lovely intercultural art project last year with all the different parents from the different backgrounds in the school. And that was really lovely. They all came together every week and helped each other, painting representations of their own country . . . it's lovely. It's very much an open door. . . it was just lovely to see people, maybe that felt a bit nervous about coming into the school, and maybe from their own experience of when they were in school themselves, that they feel welcomed, that they feel at ease relaxed, that you know that because it can be hard if you if you've had negative experience of education yourself, you may not want to go back into a school again after that. So no, they're a great group . . . really lovely group. Now that we're delighted to have [them] involved here in the school you know.*

The participant also discussed the importance of role models and the impact the school can have on the children and parents by creating an inclusive environment where everyone is respected, welcome and their culture is celebrated.

Participant C - *[parents visiting the school can] create role models I think for young children as well to see their mothers or members of their own community in education . . . the*

*kids were so proud when they came in, and they read stories to the junior infant classes. It was just really lovely regarding Traveller education and children were able to associate with that . . . and say yes, I'm the Traveller, you know, it's actually lovely . . . we're all trying to do the same thing here. You want to do away with barriers, you want to . . . let everybody feel welcome and everybody just have access to education and feel welcome in school, and wouldn't be lovely just to see more and more from the Travelling community moving on, completing second level, moving on towards university, and I think that's the start of it with that group of mothers in our area anyway, you know, so hopefully it will build on that you know.*

One participant is connected to the Travellers of North Cork social media and talks about the progress the Travellers are making themselves, and how they are creating opportunities and building pathways for young Travellers to progress in education.

*Participant G - I'm linked on their Facebook pages, I see lots of messages about different courses going on [in the local college], short courses for adult men and women, you know, which is great. So, pathways into college and universities, which would be very important, but it would be lovely to have some people from the Travelling community involved as SNAs in the school . . . or involved in our homework club . . . it would be fabulous if we had a teacher, we would love that . . . But I think role models that are also extremely important and for all children in the school, but particularly from people . . . from the Travelling community, so that they can see where they can go with this piece of education that they have, you know.*

The practitioners that are interested in the children have participated in Traveller Culture Awareness Training and promote Traveller culture in their school. They want to provide opportunities for Travellers to become more involved in the school and appreciate the importance of Traveller children having role models that they can identify with in the school environment.

### 3a.5 Traveller Cultural Awareness Training and the Yellow Flag Programme

All participants were asked if they had any Traveller Cultural Awareness Training in their school, and the Yellow Flag Programme. Some participants had already engaged, others hoped to but had not yet, and others had never heard of it.

Participant C - *we're part of the Yellow Flag Programme this year. So yeah, it's fantastic. And so, we had Traveller Awareness Training . . . which was excellent, it was really good . . . it was thought provoking. It made you sit back and think about the things . . . not just regarding the Travelling community, but other maybe cultures as well that come to Ireland.*

Another participant had never heard of Traveller Culture Awareness Training.

Participant C - *Specialized training? I suppose the only training that they have is probably from experience. I'd be thinking. I'm not too sure now of any teacher that has done any courses or anything like that in that area.*

When asked if the school has the Yellow Flag some schools had not heard of that either.

Participant D - *I doubt it, I haven't heard of it anyway.*

When asked if Traveller Cultural and Identity Awareness should be included in teacher training programmes, one participant felt that it would not be necessary for all students in Teacher Training colleges but might be more appropriate for schools to provide the training if there are Traveller children in attendance.

Participant F - *I know myself from girls that I'm still pally with from college, like some of my friends have never taught a Traveller. You know, so I mean obviously for somewhere like [name of town] well, that would be extremely relevant. And there are certain towns, you know, where it would be very relevant, but then there's . . . country schools down in Kerry, in West Cork that would never have a Traveller come through them . . . So, I don't know like. I suppose if you knew where you were going to end up, definitely it will be worth doing a module, but I suppose it would be more useful for individual schools to apply for that kind of training and to have it regularly, you know, so there's new teachers coming along to schools would have a chance.*

Participant A responded with a very definite answer regarding including Traveller Culture and Identity in teacher training saying:

Participant A - *100% Why would you leave it out?*

All respondents were open to the idea of having Traveller Cultural Awareness Training in their schools to get a better understanding of the children they have in their classrooms.

3a.6 In an Ideal World what would help remove barriers to education for Traveller children?

When asked what supports they think would help combat the barriers for the children and families, in an ideal world, and participants responded with much the same points as the parents had. Traveller Cultural Awareness Training to promote diversity was top of the list and also the possibility of having Travellers on the school staff so that Traveller children have role models.

Participant A - *I think the education of . . . new teachers and staff, education of school population regarding culture, and the funding would have to be there. And some education for, you know, some time for parent-groups to understand how school systems work so that they can be more confident coming into it . . . Tea together, have a chat and say take that whole sting out and say we're just people meeting each other, we're working together. We'll do what we can. We need to hear from you. You need to hear from us. Let's keep this open communication, you know. . . . they're fierce intimidated by teachers, you know. Yeah. So, funding and training, if we had it . . . I just would like that their future would be brighter knowing that systems are in place for them, you know.*

Participant E - *I suppose it's all kind of the diversity and how we can, like, promote diversity and how we can include everybody and try and get resources . . . for . . . the different cultures and I suppose it's just mainly trying to work on that, and promote it, and let everybody, the school community know that that's what we're doing and any contributions they have to help us to, you know, promote it in the school.*

Participant C - *We would love . . . if they'd like to come work experience. We actually had a girl from the Traveller Community here on work experience for SNA last year, t'was lovely, but you'd like to just open that up a bit more, to even employ some member of the Travelling Community, maybe in homework clubs if they were interested, you know, it would be lovely . . . and the children to see that they have a member of their family or their group . . . that would be*

*in the school and employed by the school and treated the same as everybody else. Like, so yeah, yeah.*

Participant G - *I do believe that the ladies who did the graduate program with you down in Cork, I really do believe that they are going to change things . . . They're strong women . . . They're good leaders, they'll bring people with them, you know. And . . . things line up, and I've often said that to them . . . I know in our school we're very open and curious. And I know the other two schools are going to follow inline . . . we're part of the Yellow Flag Programme this year, I know they're [other schools] going to . . . apply for it as well . . . We're all on the one wavelength, so, when we're all working together, please God, the standards will raise . . . it might be a bit aspirational, but sometimes the right pieces have to be put in place, you know.*

The schools that did participate in the research are doing their best to support Traveller children with the resources they have available to them within the system. In an ideal world, all schools would be committed to educating the children to reach their full potential, and schools employ Travellers as role models within the education system.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

Some of the key actions for Traveller education outlined in the *National Traveller & Roma Inclusion Strategy* (2017) have been explored to see if any of these have been achieved in practice according to the experiences of this cohort of Travellers. The research found that there are indeed significant barriers to educational progression, and these were identified during the focus group discussions, by parents and grandparents of children currently in school. The participants also proposed solutions to address these barriers and improve educational outcomes and children's well-being in school. The questions were open-ended and not specifically focused on any aspects of school, to allow the discussion to organically evolve, so that participants could share their positive and negative experiences according to what was most important to them. The emergent themes included discrimination, experiences of inclusion or exclusion in school, intergenerational experiences and finally, participants were asked to share their vision of their children's education going forward, in an ideal world. Interviews were conducted with education practitioners, and the questions were centred around the themes and sub-themes that emerged

from the focus group discussions, in particular, Special Educational Needs Assessments, supports, segregation and exclusion, inclusion, parent-school relationships, Traveller Cultural Awareness, and finally, how could the barriers be addressed to ensure Traveller children have improved educational outcomes and life-chances. The education practitioners spoke about their efforts to support children and their parents with the available resources. They also discussed their activities to promote inclusion in an effort to build positive parent-school relationships.

The overarching theme that emerged from the focus group discussions is discrimination within the school, both direct and indirect. The findings illustrate that Traveller children are directly discriminated against, as some children are transitioning through primary school without any special educational needs assessments. This is a systemic problem as there are limited resources with only one or two NEPS assessments available to each school per year, therefore, as noted in the interviews, they have to be *used wisely*. The NTRIS Report states that “[t]he Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and TUSLA will develop proactive, early intervention education welfare supports to promote and support Traveller and Roma attendance, participation and engagement with the education system and retention to the Leaving Certificate or equivalent” (2017:25). This report was published in 2017 yet children are still not being assessed in primary school, and this ultimately creates further barriers as they transition to secondary school and often leads to early school leaving. Schools need extra NEPS assessments to ensure Traveller children receive the intervention at an early age so that they are not ‘left behind’. *The DEIS Plan* (2017) replaces the 2005 plan, and its ambition is for Ireland “[t]o become the best in Europe at harnessing education to break down barriers and stem the cycle of inter-generational disadvantage by equipping learners to participate, succeed and contribute effectively to society in a changing world” (2017:6). However, many Traveller children do not attend DEIS schools, therefore, to become the ‘best in Europe’ at breaking down barriers, schools where Traveller children are in attendance need more funding to provide the extra resources necessary to ‘stem the cycle of inter-generational disadvantage’ and ensure that Traveller children are not ‘left behind’.

A few very specific stories stand out in this research, highlighting the discrimination, trauma and humiliation Traveller children and their parents are still subjected to in the school environment,

both primary and secondary. In particular, the lack of Special Educational Needs Assessments for children in primary school is a very concerning issue where it could be argued that discrimination is at play as measures are in place whereby schools can instigate a plan if a child is falling behind. Even if the financial resources are limited and there are *only* one or two NEPS assessments available per school per year, teachers and school principals can initiate support for the child, in collaboration with parents. NEPS offers 'a consultative model' which 'empowers teachers to intervene' and start the process of assessment at an early stage. Schools have been advised of this process and the necessary resources are available online and teachers may consult their NEPS psychologist should they need to at this stage in the process. Only in the event of a failure to make reasonable progress, in spite of the school's best efforts in consultation with NEPS, will the psychologist become involved with an individual child for intensive intervention (gov.ie,2020). Some schools do follow the continuum of support, although according to the school respondents, some children arrive in secondary school without any diagnosis, and in some cases, they have not even been flagged as needing extra resources.

According to the *Special Educational Needs, A Continuum of Support: Guidelines for Teachers*, (2007) guidelines, are available to help teachers identify any learning or social difficulties, with templates included for teachers to instigate plans to support children and provide interventions at an early stage where necessary. "These Guidelines have been designed to assist teachers in primary schools to identify needs and to develop and evaluate interventions to meet those needs. The accompanying Resource Pack is intended to provide practical advice and photocopiable templates for teachers to use or adapt for their own use in supporting pupils in their classroom and school" (gov.ie, 2007:1). If the physical, social and educational needs of children are not addressed in the early years, they lag behind year on year, until it becomes difficult to catch up thus, the child becomes more frustrated in school. The guidelines state that the initial assessments are carried out in the school and then a plan is made between the school and the parents. "The teacher also needs to place their classroom and school within the wider context of the pupils' lives. The complex physiological, social and emotional needs children bring to school should be considered in addition to their learning needs within school. A useful model (and an example of how it can be used) for considering the basic needs of pupils can be found in



the Resource Pack” (2007). In Helen’s case at least, the guidelines were not followed, and the Resource Pack was not used until the situation became extreme as the child had struggled through to fifth class without any assessment. Interestingly, it seems it is a substitute teacher that finally instigated a plan, which illustrates the point that the attitudes of teachers and principals towards Traveller children often have the most impact. In the case of Helen’s child, the substitute teacher defied the biases of the principal to create a positive support for the child by also including him in the school’s sporting event and acknowledged his strengths in the sporting context. Helen’s story is not in isolation thus, can be perceived as discrimination against the Traveller children, as even with limited resources available, the primary schools should have had a plan in place to support the child. Surely the school inspector can see where a child is not thriving if they look closely at the children's performances more closely. In fact, it could be argued that inspectors should look specifically at the school files and reports for Traveller children.

Traveller children are waiting too long for assessment, thus missing out on vital early interventions to support them in their learning, as is seen in the case of Helen’s child. This finding was backed up by the respondents from schools, as children are transitioning into secondary school without any assessment or diagnosis, thus making it more difficult for the school as there is a delay in getting the resources to provide support for the child. In some cases, where the school has DEIS status, one respondent noted that they sometimes do manage to find the resources to pay privately to have children assessed at an early stage. Limiting resources to schools for providing assessment can open the door to discrimination against a Traveller child as the school will make a choice regarding who is most deserving, or as one participant noted they have *‘one assessment a year’*, so they *‘have to use it wisely’*.

If the child’s behaviour or learning difficulty is not addressed at an early stage, the problems will inevitably escalate as the child gets older, exacerbating the issues often resulting in reduced hours and the threat of exclusion. This is an issue of concern more broadly for the Traveller Community as Bernard Joyce, the Director of the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM), said, they know of one particular school where “60 Travellers in that school are on a reduced timetable. The practice needs to be completely eradicated, with a new approach adopted towards retention and progression for Travellers, and those schools held responsible for taking the easy option and

operating under a policy of showing little value on Traveller learners” (itmtrav.ie). It is not clear whether this was a primary or secondary school but nevertheless, the problem is widespread, and the evidence here illustrates that primary school children in the North Cork Region are in fact put on reduced hours, segregated and threatened with exclusion if they do not fit into the system. A mentor or ‘One Good Adult’ would help address these issues and perhaps advocate on behalf of children and their parents.

If the school had followed the guidelines for Helen’s child, the parents, the child and the school would not be in the situation where the child is on reduced hours and sanctioned if he doesn’t follow the rules. If the child breaks any of the rules he will lose his short break, thus, denying him any social interaction with other children. Perhaps a more positive approach would be if the school could look at Strengths Based Approaches by offering rewards for good behaviour, and praise and recognition for the child’s talents, rather than punishment for not adhering to the plan. “Strengths-based models embody a student-centered form of education with the primary goal of transforming students into confident, efficacious, lifelong learners whose work is infused with a sense of purpose (Anderson, 2000) . . . a foundational assumption of strengths-based education is that potential exists in all students and that educators do well to discover and implement the kinds of learning experiences that can help their students realize this potential” (Lopez and Louis, 2009:2). If the school played to the child’s strengths by acknowledging the child’s talent for sport in the early years as the substitute teacher observed having included him against the advice of the principal, there may perhaps have been potential for the child to become a sporting hero in the school and community. Children need praise for their achievements and more support and encouragement in school and teachers ought to be raising aspirations instead of putting up more barriers. “Strengths-based education begins with educators discovering what they do best and developing and applying their strengths as they help students identify and apply their strengths in the learning process so that they can reach previously unattained levels of personal excellence” (Lopez and Louis, 2009:2). If children are excluded, ignored, or on reduced timetables, it is impossible to even recognise their strengths.

According to the *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy*, “[g]uidelines on Traveller Education in Primary Schools (2002) puts forward the department’s policy on

integration, gives information on Traveller culture, and provides advice and guidance for the management, principals, teachers and parents on responding to the educational needs of Traveller children in an inclusive manner” (gov.ie, 2006:16). Clearly, these guidelines are not adhered to according to experiences of parents and education practitioners that engaged in this research as children are not educated in an ‘inclusive manner’. For example, Joy pointed out, in her son’s case there were three Traveller boys of different ages, segregated from their own classes and placed together separately from the mainstream class. In Helen’s case, her son was on reduced hours, impacting his opportunity to learn and reducing social contact with his peers. Both cases were in primary schools. In fact, one of the school staff respondents pointed out that they recently heard of one primary school in the area is currently segregating Traveller children and putting them in a Traveller only class which makes it difficult for them to adjust to mainstream when they transition to secondary school. This practice perpetuates the discrimination and stigma experienced by Travellers in school and in wider society as they are ‘othered’ if they do not have the opportunity to mix with their settled peers. This is a very surprising and shocking finding, as one would expect that segregation of Traveller children in schools was a thing of the past. It is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed by schools and policy makers, along with reduced hours and inclusion.

The teacher-child relationship is an issue, as the findings show that a supportive teacher or school can have an enormous impact on the child’s education and overall well-being. Examples of indirect discrimination were also discussed regarding the use of technology and homework, as some educators are not accounting for parental low levels of literacy and digital literacy. Concerns about homework were also raised as some parents have low levels of literacy and digital literacy which present ongoing barriers to their children’s education and most schools now use Apps to communicate with parents and issue the homework. Participants suggested that homework clubs, where children are helped with their homework, might help address these literacy issues. Overall, success stories are dependent on the attitudes of principals and teachers in both primary and secondary schools. While parents suggest homework clubs, some schools do already have this service in place. The schools found that there are few Traveller children using this service, as the children have had a long day, and apart from this, school participants

noted in some cases, that Traveller children do not complete homework. However, if they were encouraged and supported in all primary schools to do the homework, perhaps this would not be an issue once they reach secondary school. While some schools are making efforts, there are many that have low expectations of Traveller children therefore have written them off from an early age.

Another theme that rippled through the discussions was that of inclusion and exclusion, whereby positive and negative examples were given to illustrate how some schools make little or no effort to alleviate the challenges facing Traveller children. Again, the experiences depend very much on the attitude of the teacher, the principal or the school ethos. The experiences were dependent on whether there is a bias against Travellers in the school, or whether the environment is inclusive, acknowledging Traveller identity and celebrating diversity. Some schools had no Traveller Culture Awareness Training, and others had not even heard of it. On the other hand, participants were delighted to give an account of Traveller-friendly school experiences and the efforts made by the school to create an inclusive environment, celebrating Traveller culture which illustrates how some schools promote inclusion. Even though the school is a welcoming environment, some parents do not engage as school respondents noted that some do not attend parent – teacher meetings. Parents are often not confident dealing with teachers and other professionals as their own experiences are embedded deep in the psyche, leaving them feeling vulnerable. One of the parents in Quinlan’s research said “I never went to a Parent Teacher meeting. I don’t know about them. I didn’t go to none. I would find it difficult to go to them, because they put me down so much I wouldn’t have that much confidence myself but the bit I have they’d have that gone out of me” (2021:20). One education practitioner gave the parents photos so that they could identify the teachers making the experience somewhat less daunting. This could be rolled out by the schools more generally.

For secondary schools, participants in the focus groups discussed principals and teachers’ attitudes towards Traveller children, and how these attitudes can limit subject choices as reported by Joy, and some teachers continue to encourage early school leaving. Teachers also encourage children to apply for an exemption from studying Irish, again, this is a discriminatory practice as all children should learn Irish, especially in primary school, unless there is a particular

learning difference identified, whereby parents can apply for the exemption. This was also mentioned by one of the school staff participants, as they pointed out that in some cases, children have not learned Irish in primary school therefore, will be entitled to an exemption in secondary. Teachers encouraging Traveller children and their parents to apply for an exemption from Irish and limiting subject choices, are also damaging their future prospects, as it was noted by participants, this limits their choices if they want to progress to Further or Higher education. This also illustrates how some teachers have low expectations of Traveller children thus, they are written off before they can even aspire to reach their potential to progress to further or higher education.

Other issues raised under exclusion were early school leaving, the financial cost of pre-exams, otherwise known as mock examinations, and the lack of support for progression to further or higher education. School fees are a concern for exam year students, as the cost of outsourcing the marking of pre-Junior and pre-Leaving Certificate Examinations can create financial barriers. The research found that the Traveller Grant for schools where Traveller children are in attendance is not always used appropriately. Children were told they could not sit their pre-exams unless they paid the €140 required for outsourcing the marking of them. The teachers could surely mark the papers for the small number of Traveller students, if they had the child's interest at heart. However, not all schools charge for these exams, therefore these costs should be abolished in all schools. According to the *'Guidelines on Traveller Education in Second Level Schools'* (date), schools receive a 'Special capitation grant', and the guidelines point out that [i]t will be necessary for the school to ensure that it gets the appropriate capitation grant, as defined in circular M43/99, in respect of the enrolment of Traveller students. Steps should be taken to ensure that the capitation grant is used for the education of Traveller students. The following are considered appropriate uses for this grant:

- expenses incurred in enhancing the Traveller student's experience in school
- measures to encourage attendance and participation
- educational visits and school trips

- student materials: pens, art supplies, ingredients for home economics.
- PE equipment, textbooks, uniform, classroom and learning equipment, computer support” (date:50).

One would have to argue that the cost of sitting the pre-exams and having the papers marked would surely come under the ‘appropriate uses’ outlined above, either ‘expenses incurred in enhancing the Traveller student’s experience in school’, or ‘measures to encourage attendance and participation’. Participants discussed this funding in the focus groups and said that they were told in one case that it was used for heating and lighting. They were still waiting for the breakdown of how the resources are allocated, 16 months after they requested it. The Department of Education should pay closer attention to where this fund is used when schools submit their annual budget accounts. An independent audit ought to be carried out by school inspectors regarding the Traveller Capitation Grant.

In terms of support for secondary school, parents found the schools were not supportive of children during exam years. Apart from the financial barrier posed by some schools relating to fees for pre-Junior and pre-Leaving Certificate exams, some schools refuse to offer students any help with completing CAO applications. Considering the low literacy levels and education attainment of Traveller parents, most would not be able to offer their children any help with college applications, therefore the onus should be on the school to encourage children to reach their full potential and support should be available to ensure they do achieve to the best of their ability. Most Traveller children that reach Junior or Leaving Certificate are the first-generation in their families to transition, therefore, they need extra support to enable them to achieve their potential. Teachers should be committed to raising the aspirations of Traveller children and give them hope for a brighter future. “Educators measure what they value, and they work to enhance what they measure. Those within educational institutions have long valued achievement and its associated behaviors, yet boosting achievement, attendance, and retention [of Traveller children] has been a challenge. Potentially, student strengths and other indicators such as hope, engagement, and well-being might explain unaccounted variance in academic success” (Lopez and Louis, 2009:3). The authors illustrate the importance of playing to a child’s strengths

and give them praise and recognition for their achievements rather than placing the emphasis on the weaknesses. However, if children are on reduced timetables, or excluded in any way, it is impossible to even identify a child's talents. Playing to their strengths would also ensure that the children feel included and valued in the system, thus acknowledging Traveller identity in school and creating role models are also necessary. *The Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community* recommends that a "new mechanism to provide additional funding to non DEIS schools should be developed, so that they can provide breakfast clubs and homework clubs, alongside additional supports, where they are not yet available" (2021:38). The DEIS Policy provides a template for a new policy to be developed for schools that have Traveller children in attendance to ensure they have all the vital supports necessary for educators to recognise the children's talents, thus acknowledge and praise their strengths.

On a positive note, the focus group participants discussed the commitment to Traveller culture in one school, whereby the school invites parents to participate in intercultural activities, which clearly promotes equality and diversity. The school respondents also spoke of their interaction with the parents and their shared activities in the school, such as the art project and storytelling, to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for children and parents. The school would like to see a Traveller employed in the school, as a Teacher, an SNA or in their homework club should a position arise. Travellers should be more visible in schools as this would provide role models and raise the aspirations of the Traveller children. This is an example of good practice; whereby other schools would do well to follow their example. However, until there are some radical changes in the education system to support Traveller children, and barriers removed in primary and secondary education, the progression rates to further and higher education will not increase for many years. Therefore it is a catch 22 situation. While some teachers are doing their best to support the children and families with the resources available to them, others need education so that schools can eradicate negative stereotyping and bias towards Traveller children and their families. Traveller parents have themselves been traumatised by the education system and the social and cultural capital divide makes it difficult for them to engage with the teachers.

In most cases, the stories recounted of past experiences were negative, and often traumatic as the parents and grandparents had been subjected to shame and humiliation on a regular basis.

Unfortunately, the discussions illustrate how the parent's educational experiences continue to haunt the present, and past traumas experienced can sometimes provide a lens through which they view their children's education, the teacher's and the system. Most of the parents were keen to recount their own memories of school, as the conversation conjured up emotions from their former experiences. Betty actually shuddered and it was evident that a chill passed through her as she recounted her memory, illustrating the stark reality of her encounters with the education system, and the level of trauma she had endured. Because of her experience, she noted that she would *never force her own children to go to school*. These past traumas inevitably inform the present for many parents in terms of their children's education. They have a lack of trust in the system, thus, making efforts to protect their children as much as possible. Teachers and school staff ought to be made acutely aware of this and they should make a conscious effort not to re-traumatise parents by treating their children equally with fairness and respect. While parents do their best for their children and try to protect them from adversity, the onus is on schools to assure them that their children are safe, and receiving the education they deserve. However, this is not happening as children continue to be segregated and sanctioned in schools if they are not fitting into the system. As one respondent from a school said, *there is a big gap in the system and it's the square peg in the round hole*. It is the system that needs to change to ensure Traveller children fit in, and extra resources given to all schools where Traveller children are in attendance. Further to this, the school has to be accountable for the allocation of such resources to ensure that Traveller children are benefiting.

The cycle of generational disadvantage presents children and their families with further barriers as the parents noted sometimes feeling inadequate or '*overpowered*' when dealing with school principals and teachers. Considering their own traumatic experiences, it is not surprising that parents do not attend parent-teacher meetings. This issue was raised in conversations with school staff, who noted that parents do not always engage as some feel *awkward* or *embarrassed* when having to deal with the school staff. Trauma and fear are more likely the emotional responses preventing them engaging with the school. Betty's story gives us a clear picture of the trauma experienced in the past, and the research shows that children continue to be subjected



to sustained experiences of discrimination, isolation and trauma. The research found discrimination is evident on several levels as many schools or educators have low expectations, therefore there is a lack of encouragement from the school to help children achieve their full potential, incidents of segregation, and also teachers encouraging children to leave school at 16, whereby it was noted that in one case at least, a teacher was actively encouraging the child to leave school. It is not surprising that some Travellers choose to mask their identity to protect their children from these experiences of discrimination. As one mother said, she *'didn't acknowledge her children as Travellers when registering them for school, as she didn't want them to have the same experiences as she did'*. Traveller children and parents should not have to hide their identity to avoid being humiliated in school, in work, or in everyday life.

Participants spoke about wider issues of discrimination, racism, and humiliation in everyday life which perpetuates the trauma, the feelings of exclusion and not being welcome. Raising aspirations and giving positive feedback is important for children to achieve and to feel a sense of pride, but instead, Travellers often feel *'put down'* in school, and in some cases dehumanized in wider society. This discrimination is described as *normal* in their lives and is highlighted in the story where the women tried to book a celebratory meal after they graduated with the Diploma in Leadership in the Community, from UCC. Ava pointed out that they can experience this *'ten times a day'*. Some of the comments from participants in this research highlight examples of such discrimination, as they said that they want to be treated as *'humans'* and described feeling *'like dirt'* and even being referred to as *'dogs'*. Although these experiences are described as *'normal'* for Travellers, this constant humiliation perpetuates shame and trauma which becomes internalised, thus, making it difficult to face new environments, or deal with people in *'settled'* institutions such as schools and other educational environments.

The women that had completed the Diploma are proud of their achievements and some are continuing their educational development empowering them to advocate on behalf of other members of the Traveller Community. However, the lasting impact of trauma and the internalised feeling of exclusion is evident as one of the women that graduated from UCC had

decided not to go for the graduation. She did not feel confident enough to go to University College Cork as she felt the award might be taken away from her. Following Pierre Bourdieu's ideas, it could be argued here that Betty felt like a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu, 1987, cited in Cummins et al, 2021). This is not surprising as the Pavee Beoir Report (Cummins et al, 2021) found that the group studying on the programme preferred to have their classes at an outreach centre, and that sense of not belonging was one of the reasons cited. That internalised fear of not being good enough was like a spectre of past traumatic experiences, haunting the present for Betty. Despite this, she is now actively involved in Community Development and working with the other Traveller women, towards improving the educational experiences and outcomes for Traveller children and their parents. While education has given the women a sense of empowerment, they still feel ignored and demoralised at times when dealing with schools.

Following the general discussion, participants were asked what changes could be made to remove barriers to improve progression rates and educational outcomes for their children. The responses were unanimous, as all participants cited more SEN assessments in schools, Traveller Cultural Awareness Training and the Yellow Flag Programme should be delivered in all schools, Traveller Cultural Awareness Training should be included in Teacher Training Colleges, and Traveller Culture should be included in the school curriculum. The participants felt that more awareness would reduce bias, racism and challenge the stereotypes that are often portrayed in the media. Furthermore, Quinlan suggests that "[t]here needs to be societal and state recognition of the trauma experienced by Traveller families on multiple levels – including racism, discrimination; housing deprivation; mental health challenges; intergenerational trauma due to systemic and structural discrimination" (2021:48). Educators should be made aware of the traumatic impact negative attitudes and discrimination can have on children, impacting their overall well-being and detrimental to the child's future. Teachers should also be aware of the intergenerational trauma experienced by Travellers, therefore become more educated in how to take a trauma-informed approach to the children and avoid re-traumatising them and their parents. *The Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community* point out, "due to the documented traumatic history of Traveller parents within the Irish schooling system, it is

important to acknowledge that if a school environment feels unsafe, any interaction could retrigger trauma reactions and result in disengagement by the parent. School structures should be trauma informed and trauma responsive” (2021:38). Thus, the Department of Education should provide training in Trauma Informed Practice and Trauma Informed Care to all educators.

According to Dr Maria Lotty, “[t]rauma-informed care is a broad model of care that aims that support people who have experienced trauma through embedding an awareness of impact of trauma exposure, responses that support recovery and avoid re-traumatization in policy, procedures and practice at every level of an organization. It is underpinned by a set of practice principles: safety, choice, trustworthiness, collaboration, and empowerment” (Elliott et al., 2005; SAMHSA, 2014, cited in Lotty, 2021). Trauma Informed Care is seen as a paradigm shift away from a traditionally deficit orientated understanding of trauma, that individualises the person’s difficulties and minimises the wider contextual influences on a more compassionate and contextualised standpoint (Knight, 2015). Trauma Informed Care is concerned with issues of social justice, power relationships and human rights (Tseris, 2018) placing the response to trauma within a strengths-based framework that considers the person’s broader ecological context” (DeCandia & Guarino, 2015, cited in Lotty, 2021: 163). Those in front-line practice roles such as teachers play a significant role in the application of trauma-informed care. This requires a deeper understanding of traumatic experiences, and methods of intervention that support recovery beyond awareness. This is described as the practice of trauma-informed care and has been defined as ‘a holistic therapeutic practice approach that reflects a mindset and skillset that promotes empowerment and growth for both the service user and practitioner.’ (Lotty, 2021,p.165). This model of practice is implemented through the current CPD Certificate in Trauma-informed Practice in Education, an ACE (UCC) programme that targets educators (early years professionals, primary and secondary school teachers): <https://www.ucc.ie/en/ace-ccpdtp/> Given the extensive experiences of trauma by Traveller children, seen in this study and elsewhere, notably the intergenerational experiences of trauma, the practice of trauma-informed care may provide a promising response to support teachers to deepen their understanding and intervention that may reduce/ minimise inadvertently re-traumatization and

compounding Traveller children's experience in the education context. Such practice would need to include the experiences of Traveller children and their families. The participants have strongly recommended that Traveller Culture Awareness Training should be included in the Teacher Training Programmes. This could be delivered in partnership with the CPD in Trauma Informed Practice in Education as a collaboration between ACE and Traveller TCAT Trainers as a mandatory CPD for educators funded by the Department of Education. The CPD in Trauma informed practice currently delivered at ACE, address's themes of humiliations, shame and trauma that are experienced by young people.

Visions of an ideal world more generally for the parents, was a world within which they would be treated with respect and dignity, and that their children would be encouraged, and have their aspirations raised so that they can progress to Further and Higher Education and become role models in their Community if they wish to do so. Sadly, this research illustrates that Traveller children past and present, are rarely acknowledged for their achievements, nor given that sense of pride necessary for the overall wellbeing of the child. This is also illustrated in the reflections from the parents on their own educational experiences, as well as those of their children and grandchildren. Parents said that in an ideal world they would like to be respected and treated fairly and equally. "All pupils have needs including the need to feel a sense of belonging, they need to feel safe, the need to communicate and to be communicated with and the need to be respected and valued" (2007:3). Unfortunately, some of the stories recounted in this study were those of discrimination and marginalisation, illustrating that government guidelines have not been followed, and resources have not been used for the educational and social well-being of children who have been utterly neglected by the school. The guidelines state that "teachers need to view their pupils as learning not only within their classroom setting but also within the context of the ethos and culture of the school. It is important, therefore, to be mindful of how the culture, ethos and learning environment of the school demonstrates to each pupil that he/she is respected and valued. How the school promotes the moral, social, emotional, cultural, intellectual and physical development of all learners is central to the development of an inclusive ethos" (2007:3).

The education practitioners that responded are clearly doing their best to create an inclusive environment for the parents and children in different ways. For example, giving parents photos of teachers to speak to at the parent-teacher meeting. Other respondents illustrate how the school values Traveller culture and promotes an ethos of diversity and inclusion, whereby Traveller parents have been involved in Art Projects to celebrate Traveller culture and storytelling. Although it could be argued that one of the schools has extra resources due to its DEIS status, the responses from staff at that school clearly indicate that the children's wellbeing is at the centre of everything they do. Not only are the parents welcome and invited to participate in events in the school, but school respondents also said that they would like to have Travellers working in the school so that the children can see role models from their own community. The respondents from other schools are also clearly doing their best with the resources available to them. However, the commitment to achieving best practice to improving educational outcomes for Traveller children needs systemic change whereby Traveller Cultural Awareness Training ought to be mandatory for all educators whether Travellers attend their schools or not.

Irish language is also an issue as some students get an exemption from studying it. While this exemption can be applied for, it should not be actively encouraged as was the case for one student that is aiming to become a teacher, but she was determined and continued to study Irish for the Leaving Certificate. This negative attitude of the teacher could well have resulted in the child feeling overpowered, damaging her prospects, and the possibility of the next generation of Traveller children having a role model that they can identify with in the classroom. Encouraging Irish exemptions will impact on potential for Travellers to apply for teacher training in the future as Irish is a compulsory requirement for teachers, and government policy aims to encourage and educate more Travellers to become teachers.

Empowerment through education and Community Development Projects illustrates that given the resources, Travellers are changing things from the inside out. Participants speak of constantly having to fight for rights and recognition, often in the face of adversity as they still often feel overpowered by the professionals they deal with. The parents' discussions of both their own

negative school experiences, and the experiences of their children, suggest that very little has changed from one generation to the next. Traveller parents want their children to have better educational experiences and outcomes than they themselves had. According to the Parents, they want a brighter future for their children, but the level of success is mostly dependent on the principal's and teacher's attitudes towards the children as they are sometimes written off by the school and the education system. Practices such as active encouragement of early school leaving, lack of assessment and early intervention, lack of support for children showing ambition to pursue Further or Higher education, are all at odds with what the government would like to achieve as stated in the NTRIS (2017) report. If we are to achieve equality of opportunity it is first of all essential to recognise the rights of the Traveller child, and ensure they have the equality of outcome. Traveller children need to be supported and encouraged in school if we are to raise aspirations, so that they can see a future, and they can work towards achieving their goals. Unfortunately, this research shows that Traveller children still face significant barriers to progression in education at all levels. Government needs to step up and ensure vital resources are in place and schools actively encourage Traveller children to reach their full potential and have hope for the future.

In an effort to break the cycle of generational disadvantage, Traveller parents strive to become more educated themselves. The participants in the focus groups are proud of their achievements and spoke of their graduation from Adult Continuing Education at UCC in April 2022 with a Diploma in Leadership in the Community, and some are also engaged in Train the Trainer Programmes, and other short courses to enable them to advocate on behalf of their Community. However, the structural barriers persist, and while Travellers are doing their best to improve the overall quality of life of their Community from within, the issues often lie with 'settled people' as it is an uphill struggle to demystify the myths and challenge the negative stereotypes that they are subjected to. The Irish Government aims to improve progression rates to Further and Higher Education for Traveller children, however, this will not happen unless barriers these barriers are addressed in primary and secondary schools.

The women working for Travellers of North Cork, and those who participated in this research, are true leaders for their community, relentless in their efforts to improve the life chances and educational outcomes for Traveller children!

## 5. Recommendations

Several recommendations on how to improve the educational experience and rates of progression for Traveller children were noted as follows:

### **Combat Systemic Racism to improve the learning experience for Traveller children.**

- It is essential that all schools have Traveller Cultural Awareness Training to eliminate systemic racism, discrimination and bias, either conscious or unconscious. This ought to be a mandatory Traveller led CPD for all educators, rolled out by the Department of Education.
- The TCAT Training could be aligned with a course in Trauma Informed Practice in Education. Adult Continuing Education, UCC, have an existing CPD in Trauma Informed Practice in Education, and would be interested in engaging with Travellers to develop a Traveller specific programme, which could be rolled out nationally, and delivered by Traveller facilitators involved in delivering TCAT.
- All schools should actively promote cultural identity, diversity and inclusion for all children, therefore schools need to engage in the Yellow Flag Programme to ensure that schools are Traveller Friendly environments.
- Traveller Culture Awareness should also be introduced into the curriculum and be included as a core module in Teacher Training Programmes.
- The team at Adult Continuing Education at UCC, would also be interested in designing a short course on Empowerment - Empowering Traveller Adults to Deal with Services. The aim of this programme would be to increase confidence and self-esteem, empowering Travellers to speak up on behalf of themselves, their children and their Community. This programme would be designed in collaboration with Travellers of North Cork, to ensure Travellers needs are met.
- Every school should have 'One Good Adult' or a mentorship programme for children to have a safe person to approach with any issues they have. Ideally, this would be a member of the Traveller Community. However, since there are very few Travellers working in schools, this should be a Traveller friendly person that has received the appropriate



training in Traveller Cultural Awareness and Trauma Informed Practice in Education, and is committed to the ethos of equality, diversity and inclusion.

- Schools should consider how to ensure that Travellers have access to information in paper form as well as the Apps and email, to account for the low levels of digital literacy for some parents.
- Schools should offer Traveller parent-teacher evenings to encourage and support parents in supporting their children.

### **Provide extra supports to improve educational outcomes for Traveller children**

- The Department of Education needs to develop a new DEIS Light Policy to provide extra DEIS type supports for schools where Traveller children are in attendance.
- Targeted measures that are agreed with Traveller organisations should be introduced, and specific funding should be made available for schools to support Traveller students to progress in education.
- Extra NEPS assessments for schools where Traveller children are in attendance to allow for early intervention.
- Fees for pre- junior and Pre-Leaving cert exams ultimately need to be abolished as some schools outsource the marking and charge fees. In the meantime, costs should be covered for anyone with a medical card, and any other fees should be covered by the Traveller grant. The cost is ultimately a barrier to progression.
- The Ombudsman for Children ought to be notified about the financial concerns raised by parents, regarding Pre-Junior and Leaving Cert Exams. This fee is discriminatory against not only Traveller children, but also children from other lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Specific supports and guidance for Traveller children transiting from junior to senior cycle, and specific support for Leaving Cert students regarding progressing to Further and Higher Education. Supports to include; raising aspirations, identifying pathways to progression, completing CAO forms and college applications.

- Free Homework/Youth clubs should be established at a local Family Resource Centre or at another safe space for Traveller children. Support should be given to children completing their homework, followed by recreational activities.
- Traveller Home-School Liaison Person should be recruited for the North Cork region.

**Oversight of measures introduced to combat systemic racism in schools.**

- The Department of Education should equality proof any policy measures introduced in education to ensure that there are no unintended consequences of discrimination covered under the nine grounds which, according to “The Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 (‘the Acts’) prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and education. They cover the nine grounds of gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion, and membership of the Traveller community” (ihrec.ie).
- The Department of Education should conduct an annual audit of Traveller Grants in Schools to ensure this funding is used appropriately.
- The Irish Human Rights Equality Commission should carry out a review to ensure that all schools comply with their Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, and it is recommended that the school Boards of Management identify schools' engagement with Travellers as key stakeholders, to ensure that solutions to address discrimination are workable.
- A local task force to be put together to examine ongoing issues, to include Traveller inter-agency groups as well as local educators and other interested parties.
- Schools should assess, address and report on all measures taken to address discrimination, and identify supports provided to ensure that Traveller children can achieve their full potential.

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