

Education and the Traveller Community

The Report of the 1995 Government Task Force on the Travelling Community recommended the establishment of a Traveller Education Unit within the Department of Education which would have a wide ranging remit for drafting policy, designing in-service programmes, promoting research and monitoring progress. As important as service provision, however, is the adoption by all schools of a positive approach to intercultural issues embracing the concerns of the Traveller community.

MICHAEL O'REILLY is Vice-Principal in St. Kieran's N.S. for Traveller Children in Bray, Co.Wicklow. He is the Chairperson of the Association of Teachers of the Traveller People and also currently the Chairperson of the Level One Arts Education Committee of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

TRAVELLER CHILDREN: RESPECTING CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

The Government White Paper *Charting our Education Future* (1995) states that: "Each distinctive group within a democracy has the right to participate fully in its education system and to have its traditions respected" (p.26) and proceeds to issue two guarantees - firstly, that children of the Traveller community should enjoy integrated education and secondly, that the placement of Traveller children in special settings will only be on the basis of special educational need.

Each of these three statements has a profound implication and, if acted on, will result in great change. Before discussing these implications, however, there is a more subtle, but much more important, change in policy makers' attitudes to Travellers signalled in the White Paper which should be highlighted. This policy attitude has been done simply by listing 'Children of the Traveller Community' separately from 'Students with Special Needs'.

'STRUCTURALLY PRODUCED' LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

The aforementioned distinction speaks volumes. It asserts that the special needs of Traveller children centre around issues such as ethnicity and culture and not learning disability. This belief has long been held by many who work in the field of Traveller education. It is supported by much of the research into Gypsy/Traveller education carried out in the European Union and is succinctly expressed by Kenny (1996) when she describes the learning difficulties which some Traveller children display as being "structurally-produced learning difficulties". In her study, Kenny found that Traveller children engaged in 'resistance', as defined in Willis (1977). Unlike Traveller children however, the working class children studied by Willis, constructed their resistance around ethnicity not class. Like Willis's 'lads', Traveller children's resistance was reproductive. This resistance was not all consciously engaged in; part of it consisted in persistent under-performance: able children convinced they were unable for challenges. This, Kenny claims, is 'structurally produced' learning difficulty, the roots of which lie in imposed stereotyping and a history of exclusion as 'unfit' people. Therefore, the key element in understanding the problems which many Traveller children have in relation to schooling, is to be found in the clash between school culture and their own culture.

EDUCATION IN CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Returning then to the first issue raised in the White Paper i.e. respect for tradition, the primary task facing educators is outlined succinctly in the Swann Report (1985): "The fundamental change that is necessary is the recognition that the problem facing the education system is not how to educate the children of ethnic minorities, but how to educate all children." The onus is on the education system to provide education which is intercultural in nature and which includes three elements.

TOWARDS AN INTERCULTURAL SCHOOL

- 1. Celebrating cultural diversity in the classroom**
- 2. An affirming school ethos**
- 3. A programme on anti-racist education**

1. In the content of what we teach we must challenge the perception that we are part of a mono-cultural society. There is huge diversity among the children we teach and this needs to be celebrated. No child should be called upon to leave behind the culture of the home on entering a school.
2. Each school needs to develop an affirming school ethos which genuinely values and affirms the background/culture of every child and where the positive worth of each individual is valued and openly recognised.
3. A specific programme of anti-racist education needs to be developed and taught in all schools. It is recognised that children as young as three have already developed racist attitudes. A structured anti-racist programme would aim to challenge such attitudes.

INTEGRATION : REVIEWING SCHOOL POLICY AND PRACTICE

The second issue raised by the White Paper is integration. For many years Traveller parents have demanded that their children be educated in classes with their settled peers. For long this aspiration has been thwarted by the establishment of special classes, by segregation policies in schools and by admission and enrolment policies which militate against nomadism. If integration is to be successfully achieved, these policies and practices must be reviewed by schools. Such a process will be much facilitated by the third guarantee in the White Paper which states that Traveller children who have special educational needs will be dealt with on the same basis as other children with similar needs, i.e. by the provision of remedial or other resource assistance.

TRAVELLER CHILDREN IN EDUCATION : A NATIONAL PROFILE

At the present time, the participation of Traveller children in education might be summarised as follows:

- there are approximately 56 pre-school units operating throughout the country.
- the majority of Traveller children of primary school age (approximately 5,000) are enrolled in schools (The Task Force report cites a figure of 4,200), although attendance is problematic.
- there is practically no participation in mainstream second level education.
- the Task Force report states that out of a population of approximately 2,000, about 1,600 do not continue in education after primary school; 300 are attending Junior Training Centres and some are retained in the primary sector

- which would seem to indicate that less than 100 are in secondary education.
- figures for participation in other forms of education such as senior training, FÁS courses and university education are not exact but are probably minimal.

ADDRESSING DEFICITS IN THE SYSTEM

There are obviously major problems to be addressed in examining the situation outlined above. Both the White Paper and the Government Task Force Report attempt to address these difficulties and make a number of recommendations which might be summarised as follows:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

1. The setting up of a National Traveller Education Service.
2. The expansion of the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers.
3. The removal of barriers to enrolment and full integrated education.
4. A concerted campaign to tackle poor attendance.
5. The introduction of intercultural and anti-racist programmes at all levels of the education service.
6. Working with Traveller parents to encourage greater involvement in their children's education thus bringing them more fully into the planning and administration of the education system.
7. Increased funding and school staffing levels.
8. Expansion of the school transport system.

It is beyond the scope of this article to comment in depth on the specific recommendations contained in the Task Force Report. The Report contains 167 specific recommendations which must be read in conjunction with the recommendations regarding relationships, culture, discrimination, accommodation, health, economics and women. The remainder of this article will concentrate on three issues: the Traveller Education Service, the teaching service and intercultural education.

A TRAVELLER EDUCATION SERVICE

The Task Force Report envisages the setting up of such a service to ensure the implementation of a national policy on Traveller education and to co-ordinate much of the work which is currently underway in fields such as the development

of educational materials, in-career development, adult education, etc. This type of co-ordination has long been needed, but its primary focus will be on policy and strategy development. A model for such a service is outlined in the Task Force Report. The Report suggests that it should consist of a Traveller Education Unit, within the Department of Education, under the direction of an Assistant Secretary and would include a National Education Officer and a National Co-ordinator for Training Centres. This unit will be advised by an Advisory Committee to be appointed by the Minister for Education, which would include representatives from all levels of teaching, parents, Traveller organisations, the Association of Teachers of the Travelling People and the National Association of Training Centres.

ENABLING EFFECTIVE SERVICE DELIVERY

It is envisaged that the National Education Officer would report on a regular basis to this service. The remit of the service as outlined in the report is very comprehensive. Its brief is to include the overseeing of all activities within the Department, drawing up policy statements, organising the implementation of all the recommendations in the Report, establishing consultation processes, allocating resources, developing in-career development programmes, promoting the intercultural nature of curricula, undertaking research, developing a management structure for preschools, monitoring the Visiting Teacher Service and developing teaching materials. To assist in all of this the Report recommends the appointment of two Assistant National Education Officers (NEO), one for primary and one for secondary education.

Given the enormity of the task, this is not sufficient. If the Department of Education is serious about tackling the situation at second level, the position of National Co-ordinator for Traveller Training Centres needs to be subsumed into the post of Assistant National Education Officer for Second Level. It would be a much more efficient service if the National Education Officer's task could be augmented by four assistants who might oversee the following areas of concern:

FOCUS FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

- 1. Pre-school and primary education**
- 2. Second-level education and Training Centres**
- 3. Home-School liaison and Visiting Teacher Service**
- 4. In-Career Development Training**

1. **Preschool and Primary Education:** to liaise with teachers, the A.T.T.P., the primary schools inspectorate, the managerial authorities and the I.N.T.O.
2. **Second-level Education and Training Centres:** to liaise with teachers in secondary schools and training centres, the second level inspectorate, the V.E.C.s and other management structures, the A.T.T.P., the T.U.I. and the A.S.T.I.
3. **Home/School liaison and the Visiting Teacher Service:** to liaise with the Visiting Teachers for Travellers, other visiting teachers, the home-school liaison services, attendance officers, social services, etc.
4. **In-Career Development, curricula and materials' production:** to develop in career development modules, to develop an anti-racist programme, to commission the development of inter-cultural school materials, to liaise with Education Centres, the In-Career Development Unit of the Department of Education, the Colleges of Education, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and publishers. An additional Assistant NEO might be appointed to deal with adult and further education and to liaise with Traveller organisations on these issues.

THE TEACHING SERVICE : A CALL FOR FLEXIBILITY

The Special Class for Travellers should cease to exist. Traveller children should be enrolled in mainstream classes as are most other children. The current situation is that any school with an enrolment of twelve Traveller children can apply to the Department of Education for the appointment of a resource teacher who normally acts much like a remedial teacher, withdrawing children on the basis of need. There are a number of problems associated with this system. Is it a *sine qua non* that every school with twelve Traveller children needs such assistance? Are we not back to the system of assuming that 'Traveller' is synonymous with special needs? What happens if there are less than twelve in any one school but these children really do have special needs? How do children whose families are nomadic and who have special needs receive help? (There have been numerous examples of teachers being appointed to discretionary posts only to find that a short time after their appointments their pupils had moved on.) It must be argued that there is a need for much greater flexibility within the system in order to cope with situations like these.

VISITING TEACHERS : A SERVICE TEAM MODEL

The Visiting Teacher Service, which has been instrumental in achieving the levels of enrolment we now see at primary level, is currently well short of the

TRAVELLER CULTURE - A PLACE IN THE CURRICULUM ?

Travellers must be included in the content of what is taught. Educators must make themselves familiar with Traveller history and culture and include this in the Curriculum. There is a need to include modules on this both in pre-service and in-service education. A more subtle problem is the question of what is not taught. How many educators can say that there is any visible or written reference to Travellers in our classrooms, on display boards, or in the reading material provided for children or in the tasks set for pupils? (For that matter is there any reference to black people, to single parent families or to disability?) How many infant teachers blithely refer to our houses not realising that for some children home is not in a house!

RESOURCING ATTITUDINAL CHANGE

At present there are a number of Intercultural Committees working in various Education Centres throughout Ireland on the production of materials which will provide teachers with assistance in this field. At the Blackrock Education Centre in Dublin, materials which have been produced over the past four years may be inspected and purchased. There is also much material on the history and culture of the Travellers available from the Travellers' Centre at Pavee Point in Dublin and from the Irish Traveller Movement. The journal of the Association of Teachers of the Traveller People contains a wealth of information for teachers.

GOALS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

In conclusion, it must be stated that while much progress has been made in the past number of years, there are still many obstacles to be overcome before the stated aims of the White Paper can be achieved: that in the next five years all Traveller children will be in primary education and that in the next ten years all Traveller children will have completed the Junior Certificate Examination. The Task Force Report points the way. Is our society ready to take on the challenges it poses?

REFERENCES

Bullock Report (1975). *A Language for Life*. London : HMSO.

Crosscare: The Catholic Social Service Conference (1995). *Celebrating*

Difference: An Intercultural Programme for Senior Primary Classes.
Dublin: Crosscare / Blackrock Teachers' Centre.

Ireland (1995). *Charting our Education Future: White Paper on Education.*
Dublin: Stationery Office.

Ireland (1995). *Government Task Force on the Travelling Community. Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

Kenny, Máirín (1996). 'The Routes of Resistance: Travellers and Second-Level Schooling.' Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. Trinity College. Dublin.

O'Reilly, Michael (1993). *With Travellers: A Handbook for Teachers.* Dublin : Blackrock Teachers' Centre.

Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (1993). *Multicultural and Anti-Racist Education across the Curriculum.* Dundee: Scottish CCC.

Swann Report (1985). *Education for All : the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups.* London : HMSO.

Willis, R. (1977). *Learning to Labour : Why working class children get working class jobs.* London: Gower.
