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Integrate Whom? Into What? Indigenous Nomads and School

Traveller children are usually categorised as a problematic group in need of special education. A new concept of integration is required incorporating an intercultural curriculum for all children embracing a call to cultural enrichment and a challenge to racism.

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INTRODUCTION

Integration is a key term in educational debate today. However the word takes on different overtones when applied to the schooling, special or mainstream of Gypsies and Travellers, the indigenous nomads of Europe. In their case the term must be used in a context which is - to use another buzz word - intercultural. However, very little has been developed for classroom use which celebrates, or even recognises the culture of the various Gypsy and Traveller groups who are present in all countries of Europe and whose 'map' of Europe differs greatly from that of settled society. Our knowledge of these ancient ethnic minorities is scant.

PROBLEMS OF SEGREGATION AND INTEGRATION

In many countries Gypsy/Traveller children are categorised as a needy/problematic group in need of special education. Within this specific area of special provision there have been ad hoc, uncoordinated, unresearched, but interesting developments. Teachers and parents have become critical. Many teachers have moved from talk of 'absorption' to 'integration' to 'inclusion' and from 'multiculturalism' to 'interculturalism'. Travellers themselves, in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe assert that segregated schooling for their children is racist but also that in integrated classes they feel and are left out, or culturally annihilated (under the guise of being treated 'just like anyone else'). There is in all this a call for the inclusion of these children in the mainstream, but on certain conditions - conditions not adequately recognised even

in some Traveller classrooms, and still less so in mainstream or in areas of special education devoted to specific learning difficulties. Traveller children turn up in all these.

CULTURAL RECOGNITION AND INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS

So, while a move from a problem-based approach to a rights-based one is good, it does not ensure cultural recognition and thus does nothing to challenge the often unconscious absorptionist thrust of our services. Neither does it ensure a culturally affirmative school experience for Gypsy/Traveller children. A clearly conceptualised model of nomads - and a curriculum and practice which reflects this - is needed. For a start, I would suggest that we cease to talk of 'ordinary' schools, and 'normal' children (who is normal?). In the case of Travellers at any rate, it makes more sense to talk of 'mainstream' and 'alternative' school provision. Within alternative education (full-time Traveller classes/schools), specific learning and cultural needs receive central focus. In Ireland at present, two-thirds of Traveller children are placed in mainstream schools, with support from the remedial or peripatetic teacher for those who need it .

'Integration' therefore is a specially important word. For children in most sectors of special education, absorption is not an undesirable outcome; but for Travellers it is - there is a cultural issue at stake. Cultural recognition is what is needed, and Traveller children rarely experience it in any classroom, mainstream or special - apart from special classes specifically for themselves, and even there it is up to the individual teacher with his/her knowledge and skills. In fact, it would sometimes appear that the Traveller child who is troublesome in either kind of classroom sparks off talk about culture and the need for placement in Traveller classes where this is understood. The biddable Traveller child seemingly has no such cultural needs. I would suggest that in such cases 'culture' is a euphemism for aggressiveness. All sectors of school provision must become intercultural, or there will be no integrated future for Traveller children in our schools.

AN ETHNIC MINORITY - NOT A NEEDY GROUP

We must move to a vision-based starting point if we are to discuss productively the appropriate placement and schooling of Travellers. By working within a large enough framework we get the kind of generosity of thinking we need in order to progress. We must examine the concepts or models of Travellers which we hold, and how these shape our practice. We need to learn alternatives.

The presence of Gypsies and Travellers (traditionally useful, but unwanted) has been recorded throughout Europe since at least the 12th century. Gypsies and Travellers have a claim to recognition as an ethnic minority. It is often more easily accepted that Gypsies are an ethnic group, but any of the traditional European nomadic peoples can be so considered; for instance, the Irish Travellers are an ethnic group because they regard themselves and are regarded by others as a distinct community. This sense of distinction is based on their long shared history as a separate group, with a small set of common ancestors (one becomes a Traveller by birth, not choice); their values and customs (associated with nomadism); their language; their particular folklore and religiosity. In all this there are elements common to Travellers and settled society. However, we settled people have little idea of the significance of the differences. The information is there, despite the lack of research, if we care to look.

According to the terms of the British Race Relations Act, Gypsies and Travellers can claim ethnic status. However, other models for perceiving them are in operation (subculture of poverty, romantic group, drop-outs, inadequate etc.). In particular, the educational system is prone, I would suggest, to view them as a needy group, who chronically require help or who, with that help, will become just like ourselves. Much analysis of their situation is done from a profoundly sedentarised (settled) perspective - the significance of nomadism is underestimated (or given no significance other than as a problem to be eradicated). For instance, why do we not include nomads' homes such as trailers in a matter-of-fact, non-problematic way, in social studies, when discussing 'our homes'? We need to become conscious of the nature of our own bias, and of more creative alternatives.

PARTICIPATION, STRUCTURE AND CURRICULUM : A CHALLENGE TO RACISM

We also need to be alert to racist practice, conscious and unconscious, in relation to Gypsies and Travellers in the school system. The model/s of Travellers, often unreflected on, which inform our educational structures and practice, have specific consequences at three levels - participation, structure and curriculum. The need to work at the three levels has not been recognised and the difficulties flow at least in part from almost total preoccupation with pupil participation. When poor participation rates are blamed on racist segregation practices, we change these, often with regressive effects. Our response to the right of Travellers to integration can slip into what is really absorptionist practice in the name of anti-racism. This is as unacceptable as cultural recognition within a segregated form of provision which

does not challenge racist exclusion. We do this because we have not examined our model of nomads and how this relates to our labelling or anti-labelling practices in school. How do these children become 'labelled' or categorised as remedial, special, deviant, disadvantaged, mainstream or ethnic. (This labelling process affects also the question of training Travellers themselves as teachers.)

THE NEED FOR AN INTERCULTURAL CURRICULUM FOR ALL

So, what does 'interculturalism and nomads' mean for teachers, most of whom might never encounter Travellers in their classrooms? As I argued on behalf of the Dublin Travellers' Education and Development Group, in a submission to the Curriculum Review Body, a celebration of Traveller culture should be included in an intercultural curriculum for all children, because Travellers are a distinct cultural group in our society, about whom all children should know. The Group has developed a package of lectures for inclusion in teacher training, which has been run this year in teacher training courses in a number of Irish colleges. It would also fit well into in-service training. It includes a brief history of Travellers in Ireland, an analysis of their place in Irish society, an analysis of the educational system as it relates to Travellers and some examples of good intercultural practice which have been developed in Ireland in the area of curriculum.

A CALL TO CULTURAL ENRICHMENT

So, it is not enough to expand various types of provision and to bend structures to meet the needs of this population. Rather, teachers and the system need to be informed by clear analysis of the situation and provided with ways of teaching about nomads which are culturally respectful. This is the prerequisite for examination of the special needs of any nomadic children. We need to enlarge our vision. Travellers are entitled to an empowering education which will increase their ability to celebrate their culture and their world, and release their creativity. Settled children need a rich alternative to racist beliefs, and we might admit that we ourselves need as much enrichment as the children.