

# Exploring Levels of School Belonging for Traveller and Non-Traveller Students through a Bespoke Music Intervention in an Irish Post-Primary School

This project, which took place in an Irish post-primary school was an intervention which involved a class of Music students. The project explored how a music intervention which included Traveller community culture and traditional music impacted on scores on measures of school belonging for members of the Traveller community and their non-Traveller community peers.

The music intervention was developed by the post-primary school's assigned educational psychologist and the school's Music teacher and was funded by the school. The intervention was delivered over a ten-week period. During the ten weeks, six specialised musical experiences were delivered during regular timetabled Music classes. The participants, a class of twenty-six students which included nine Traveller students, attended a rural DEIS co-educational post-primary school in the South East of Ireland and attended music lessons as part of their school curriculum. The school facilitated participating students to complete questionnaires pre and post intervention. Data was collected using The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM) (Goodenow, 1993) and The Belonging Scale (Frederickson & Baxter, 2009). Full data for nineteen of the twenty-six students was collected and analysed.

Results of this intervention found a positive increase in the scores on both the PSSM and The Belonging Scale for the Traveller and non-Traveller students indicating a higher sense of school belonging after the intervention. Discussion of the findings and issues arising as well as implications for further work in this area are presented.

*Keywords:* School sense of belonging, post primary school, music, intervention, Traveller students

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study described here was to explore how a music intervention in a post primary school would impact on scores on measures of school belonging for members of the Traveller community and their non-Traveller community peers. The music intervention was developed by an educational psychologist and a Music teacher and took place with a Second year Music class. The music intervention included Traveller community culture and traditional music. Pre and post data was collected.

Schools, as well as being venues for formal education, play a vital role in the promotion of positive mental health in young people and can also provide a safe and supportive environment for building life skills and resilience. School belonging is defined as: ‘the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment’ (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Sense of school belonging is now considered one of the key variables in resilience and school achievement and a key construct in exploring the experiences of children in schools. A focus on a sense of belonging in schools can be an effective way of monitoring social inclusion of students with SEN (Cullinane, 2020). The importance of school belonging is acknowledged in the Department of Education and Skills’ Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES, 2019), which references how a sense of belonging acts as a protective factor for wellbeing in the school setting.

The importance placed on school belonging as an indicator of school functioning has led to the development of a number of measures of school belonging/connectedness. Two of these, the *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM)* (Goodenow, 1993) and *The Belonging Scale* (Frederickson & Baxter, 2009) are self-report measures of school belonging used extensively in research. These measures are used on this study and were identified through a literature review on appropriate measures that were standardised and published.

The Equal Status Act (Government of Ireland, 2000) acknowledges and defines the term ‘Traveller community’ as a group of people who have a shared history, culture and traditions and, in many cases, a historically nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland. There are nearly 31,000 members of the Irish Traveller community resident in Ireland, 18,000 of whom are school-aged (Central Statistics Office, 2016). Poor educational outcomes for students from the Traveller community in Ireland are unfortunately well documented. The Department of Justice and Equality published the National Traveller Roma Inclusion (NTRIS) Strategy in June 2017.

The strategy takes a whole of Government approach to improving the lives of Travellers and Roma in Ireland in ways with a number of actions involving a range of government departments. The Department of Education and Skills participated in the development of the strategy and is a member of the Steering Group which was established to oversee the implementation of the new strategy. Findings from the report stated that learners from the Traveller community leave school earlier than other groups and also demonstrate high dropout rate from secondary school (Department of Justice, 2017). This report further states that ‘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 Report further notes ‘The majority of Travellers (70%) have only primary or lower levels of education’ (p.11). A key education aim in the NTRIS (2017) report is improved outcomes for Traveller and Roma learners in education, bringing their achievement to equivalent outcomes achieved by the majority population. Foster and Norton (2012, p. 108) call on schools to play their role in ensuring Traveller (and Roma) equity and advocate for a lack of rigidity in this regard, stating ‘It still remains for schools, institutions and society to deal with racism and inequality in a way that can be tangible for these communities. Flexibility is so often the key to moving things forward in a gradualist approach.’

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2017) in Ireland undertook an audit of Traveller culture and history in the curriculum, which included consideration of the resource provided by the NCCA’s Intercultural Guidelines, which had been in place since 2006 (NCCA, 2006). The audit considered a number of issues including: the place of Traveller culture and history in the existing curriculum across the age ranges, the intercultural education guidelines and other resources for schools in relation to Travellers, the opportunities for teaching about Traveller culture and history and how this is included across the curriculum.

The NCCA audit report when completed (NCCA, 2017) highlighted a number of key factors. These included a recommendation for a whole school/setting approach, an awareness of the individual school/setting culture and the ‘hidden curriculum’, the need for active promotion and inclusion of cultural diversity approaches as well as respect for rights and responsibilities. They also recommended exploring possible opportunities to promote and validate minority cultures.

In Ireland, Music can be taken as a subject at Junior and Senior Cycle. The NCCA Junior Cycle Music Draft Curriculum Specification (NCCA, 2017) contains a rationale for studying music in regard to cultural diversity. It advocates that Music can help students in understanding the history of a country as well as enabling

them to reflect on the social and cultural context in which they live. Music education is described as allowing the development of a young person's awareness and appreciation of their own unique cultural environment. The NCCA document includes the text below which is relevant to Traveller music culture as it clearly links music education and cultural connection:

Music is important as a catalyst for building cultural capital within the individual student and the class collective. Through encountering and engaging with an array of music activities, we can ensure that we continue to develop future citizens that are culturally engaged, culturally aware and culturally connected. Being culturally aware heightens student understanding of both national and international cultural identities. With an increasingly diverse and pluralist population, this understanding of others through a cultural lens will encourage students to develop as responsible and ethical citizens (NCCA, 2017, p. 7)

For many years, writers on music education have shared their theories on the benefits of including music in the curriculum (Pitts, 2000). In *The Power of Music* (Hallam, 2014), the impact of musical activities on intellectual, social and personal development is discussed and evidence supports the case for music enhancing psychological well-being, school engagement, creativity, empathy, language and literacy, spatial awareness and numerous other skills and qualities. In a recent study, the benefits of music workshop participation for pupils' wellbeing were explored and findings suggested that playing live music together fosters a sense of belonging amongst participants (Ward et al. 2023). The marriage of traditional music and Traveller communities is highlighted in the NCCA Traveller curriculum document which notes that, 'Travellers have a strong tradition of cultural expression through traditional music and have made a distinctly recognised cultural contribution to Irish music heritage' and 'Many of the early last century musicians are collected in the national archives and folklore collections and in these there are extensive references in Irish literature to Traveller music, songs and art'(NCCA, 2017, p. 13).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Three key areas informed this research: the importance of school belonging, the positive impact of music, and the impact of school experience on Traveller students' sense of belonging.

An ESRI research paper found that negative school experiences was one factor that Traveller children cited as a reason for early leaving school (Watson, D.,

Kenny, O. and McGinnity, F., 2017). 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). As noted by Nugent (2010) there is little research on this community; however, in her work on literacy, Nugent found that students from the Traveller community made significant progress when given evidence-based literacy interventions. Frehill and Dunsmir (2015) investigated the relationship between school variables, background variables, sense of belonging and absenteeism in Traveller students in Irish secondary education aged 12 to 15 years. In their sample of 78 Traveller (N=37) and non-Traveller (N=41) students, which included first, second and third year groupings (12 to 15-years-old) in three secondary schools within the western region of Ireland in areas of highest Traveller population, Frehill and Dunsmir's statistical analysis found significant group differences between the Sense of School Community and Sense of School Connectedness, with non-Traveller students having higher scores on both measures. The authors advocated the need for adjustments to be made to the systems in post primary schools to enable inclusion of and improve Traveller students' engagement with school. One of their conclusions was 'the need for secondary schools to develop organisational structures and systems to target the promotion of sense of belonging in schools' ( Frehill and Dunsmir, 2017, p. 19).

Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin (2020) report on their work on Irish Traveller parents' experiences of their own schooling and their views on education. They reported three main themes, of which, two related to culture; the importance of pride in Traveller culture and identity, and secondly, the awareness of others' poor opinion of Traveller culture. The third theme related to feelings and referenced the negative feelings when Irish Traveller parents reflected on their own education experiences. They recalled racism and a curriculum which they did not experience as challenging. The authors however reported that even though the participants had negative experiences they were optimistic regarding the opportunities of education for their children.

While not Traveller-specific, an Australian study that explored the role of school engagement within music programs tailored to promote wellbeing and connectedness in schools (McFerran et al.), found that some music programmes promoted a sense of connectedness and relationships between peers. This study, which employed students from four different schools, including a special school catering for students aged 4-18 years, a girls' post-primary school, a primary school and a culturally diverse, inner suburban school for children aged 4-15 years, also reported on the findings that tailored music programmes could help

nurture relationships between students and staff, and also help foster new forms of relationships between different members of the school community, for example, teachers discovering new talents in students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In collaboration with the School Principal, a musical intervention which included representation from Traveller culture was developed by the school's educational psychologist and the school's Music teacher. The project design was co-developed by the educational psychologist and her colleague referred to hereafter as the 'researcher'. The methodology involved a ten-week intervention with pre- and post-data collection using standardised measure the *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM)* (Goodenow, 1993) and *The Belonging Scale* (Frederickson & Baxter, 2009)

The classes were timetabled to take place in the school hall, so that there would be enough space for students, musical instruments, teachers and other necessary equipment. It was decided that school rules would be in place as in a regular Music class. This was done to minimise any potential stress about the sessions. If a student did not want to be involved in a particular session, they were advised on procedures for leaving or taking time out. There were regular verbal 'check ins' from adults in the room with students throughout the sessions to ensure that they were comfortable and happy to take part. A detailed account of the content of the lesson is shown in Appendix A

### **Participants**

A group of 2nd Year students were identified by the school's music teacher. This intervention group consisted of 26 students (9 Traveller students and 17 non-Traveller students). In order to minimise any potential conflict with state exams and maximize the participation of students from the Travelling Community it was decided to target a Second Year group with a high incidence of students from the Travelling Community. All Second Year students from the school were offered the opportunity to take part in the study.

Full pre- and post-intervention data sets were available for 19 of the 26 participants. For some students there was incomplete data (N=7) . Of the full data set 19 students there were 9 girls and 10 boys, 7 were identified as being members of the Traveller Community (3 girls and 4 boys).

## **Data Collection**

The *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM)* (Goodenow, 1993) and *The Belonging Scale* (Frederickson & Baxter, 2009) were used in data collection.

The *Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale* is a self-reported instrument developed to assess the sense of school belonging. It consists of 18 items covering student perceptions of liking, personal acceptance, inclusion, respect, encouragement for participation and response from peers and adults in school. Students are required to respond to each item using a five-point scale ranging from 'Not at all true' to 'completely true.' The *Belonging Scale*, developed by Fredrickson is an adapted version of the *PSSM Scale*, reduced from 18 to 12 items. In this measure, students are asked to rate statements such as 'I feel really happy at my school' on a three-point response scale: 'No not true', 'Not sure' and 'Yes true.' These two scales were chosen to establish if the intervention had positive outcomes in terms of school belonging and connectedness. The midpoint of 3.0 can be regarded as the 'tipping point', below which a student is more negative than positive in their responses regarding school belonging. Goodenow (1993) suggests that students scoring below this point may be regarded as 'potentially at risk in terms of their social inclusion or commitment to education.'

The educational psychologist who co-designed the intervention maintained a log of conversations and observations throughout the intervention. This was reviewed by the researcher and findings from this qualitative data are also presented in the findings section below.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The educational psychologist (who is also a musician) and the researcher who undertook this project developed consent procedures. The school's Music teacher and Principal's consent were also built into the project design through discussion in the planning, delivery and evaluation phases. Students and parents gave their written consent. Letters of consent for both students and parents were sent home with students so as to minimize the chance of peer pressure. To allow for any potential literacy issues the Home School Liaison teacher was available to meet with parents to discuss the project and helped with obtaining written consent, where needed. There were no incidents of parents not wishing to provide consent or not wanting their children to take part in the study.

## FINDINGS

Student responses to both measures were collated pre- and post-intervention and revealed the following:

**Table 1. Scores from the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale**

Ethnic Group	Average PSSM-Pre intervention	Average PSSM-Post Intervention	Difference
Traveller ( n =7)	3.11	3.29	+ .18
Non Traveller (n=12)	3.29	3.34	+ .05
Both Groups (n=19)	3.23	3.32	+ .09

**Table 2. Scores reported from the Belonging Scale**

Ethnic Group	Average Belonging-Pre Intervention	Average Belonging-Post Intervention	Difference
Traveller ( n =7)	2.39	2.64	+ .25
Non Traveller (n=12)	2.45	2.75	+ .3
Both Groups ( n=19)	2.43	2.71	+ .28

As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2 above the Traveller PSSM and Belonging average pre intervention score were lower than non-Traveller. Both groups' scores were higher post intervention on the PSSM and the Belonging. The increase in PSSM was greater in the Traveller group than in the non-Traveller group. The increase on the Belonging scale was higher for non- Travellers than for Travellers.

### Qualitative Findings

Many of the students expressed their enjoyment of the musical intervention and talked to the psychologist about the parts they enjoyed the most. All of the classes were enjoyed by the students and they also commented on how different the classes were, compared to their usual music classes. Many of the students talked about their enjoyment of hearing a *'famous musician who is on You Tube'* perform (referring to one of the professional musicians) and enjoyed being able to ask questions following his performance. One student reported that *'it all started with him learning to play the tin whistle. I'm learning the ukulele.'*

The students from the Traveller Community expressed a strong positive reaction to the visit from the professional musician who was a member of the Traveller



Community and commented that he was *‘a Traveller himself and was able talk to us and he knows our families.’* This musician invited students who played a traditional instrument to join in with him as he played and he was also joined by a 6<sup>th</sup> Year student from an adjoining school who played the bodhrán. During his performance with the students, the musician spoke to the students from the Traveller Community with honesty and sincerity, with comments such as *‘I am like you’*, *‘it is great to have this work in school’*, and *‘Education is very important and without it, you can’t get on in life so stay in school and do your work and do what your teachers ask you to do.’*

The students also expressed their enjoyment of having cakes and buns at the end of some classes and commented *‘we don’t get this every day’*. Some members of the school staff were available to attend the ‘live concerts’ and commented that they had noticed student school attendance was better on the days when a music class was taking place.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The results of this intervention found that the use of a musical intervention resulted in higher post-intervention scores on two measures of school belonging for Traveller students and their non-Traveller peers. Given the literature which links sense of school belonging with improved educational outcomes and resilience, this finding gives cause for optimism and suggests that interventions that included music and a Traveller culture focus benefitted all students in the class. The findings that both Traveller and non-Traveller students’ sense of school belonging improved is an interesting outcome and may go some way to addressing the issues identified by Watson et al. (2017) in their report written for the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) which highlighted the tensions between the mainstreaming approach and more targeted intervention, and the risks inherent in both approaches. This study exemplifies how flexible delivery of a curriculum in a mainstream school can enable the inclusion of all students and positive outcomes in relation to sense of school belonging for all students in a class group.

With the exception of Nugent’s (2010) work on literacy there is little research on *‘what works’* for Traveller students in Irish schools. Much of the literature focuses on problems rather than practical school-based low-cost interventions. In addition, very little research on this population uses measures of wellbeing or school belonging. Replication of this study and additional research which includes creative approaches may well go some way to enabling our education system

to become a place where Traveller students want to be and where they can see themselves represented in the curriculum. This positive sense of belonging may lead to improved experiences and better retention rates and successful education outcomes for this community. Consideration by school systems of how to adapt so that Traveller students' sense of belonging is equal to their non-Traveller peers has the possibility of far-reaching consequences in terms of educational achievement.

In terms of future methodology the use of a control group, inclusion of parents, gathering of the teachers' perspectives and the gathering of attendance data are suggested. It would also be interesting to explore the possible impact of more 'nurture' practices such as preparation of meals and eating together. In addition, observation information indicates that students valued the intervention so increasing the student voice in data gathering could yield important insights. Given the dearth of research in this area and the increased focus on student wellbeing in schools, even with its methodological constraints, the authors feel that research such as this, which incorporates Traveller based music into the Music curriculum and measures school sense of belonging is valuable. Research such as this could lead to increased knowledge and improvement in Traveller students' experience of school and in turn their overall wellbeing and educational outcomes.

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## **APPENDIX A: CONTENT OF LESSONS**

Activities and workshops were provided during the 10-week intervention. Activities and workshops were scheduled for a double period on the school timetable. It was not possible to provide refreshments after every workshop as students were required to attend their usual classes, however food was provided on four separate occasions, including following workshops given by the two professional musicians.

Sessions included a combination of the following:

- Samba drumming. This was chosen as it is an exciting form of music to play using djembe drums. The students enjoyed this aspect of the project, they developed an awareness of playing as an ensemble and enjoyed the opportunity to play an instrument that they had not seen before. An unforeseen positive outcome was the School Principal inviting the participants to perform a piece of rhythmic music for the school's 6th Year Graduation Ceremony.
- Choreography. A dance instructor was invited to attend one of the workshops and some of the participants took part in a dance class where they were also encouraged to develop their own ideas for a dance routine. Some of the participants chose to create a dance to accompany a samba drumming segment and were encouraged to consider concepts such as the changing dynamics of movement and the implications of moving in relation to another person.
- Vocal workshops and choral development. The music teacher based in the school chose songs for the students to learn and also considered their personal preferences for songs, so as to get some 'buy in' from them. Therefore, songs chosen by the teacher and students tended to be songs from a 'pop-music' genre. A future study would possibly include songs from the repertoire of members of the Travelling Community, local to the school.
- Song writing and recording. In this workshop, the participants were encouraged to experiment, take risks, explore new and challenging opportunities and reflect on the creative process. Engaging in a song writing activity together, allowed participants to develop their own ideas and record something unique and original.
- Guitar and ukulele workshop. These are very popular musical instruments to learn within many school contexts, developed through schools' involvement in the Music Generation Programme. The Music Generation programme has allowed ukulele orchestras to be developed. These instruments were chosen given their accessibility in that students can often play and accompany themselves singing a song, after one lesson.
- Bespoke traditional Irish music ensemble and workshops given by two professional musicians one of whom was a member of the Traveller Community. During these workshops a key learning outcome for the sessions were that the class would understand the contribution of the Traveller community to Irish traditional music. The students were made aware of Pecker Dunne, his connection to Co. Wexford, and his contribution to music. One of the musicians invited to take part in the project was a close relative of Pecker Dunne who told his life story, in particular the role of music and his traveller identity. The songs of Maggie Barry were also referred to during the course of this project.